Blinkers

Horace Annesley Vachell

tr
50

Lummil. S. Hancock
Deutsville
md
Feb 20 1924

BLINKERS

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

By HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

NOVELS

BLINKERS
THE FOURTH DIMENSION
WHITEWASH
THE SOUL OF SUSAN YELLAM
SOME HAPPENINGS
FISHPINGLE
THE TRIUMPH OF TIM
SPRAGGE'S CANYON
QUINNEYS'
LOOT
BLINDS DOWN
JOHN VERNEY
THE OTHER SIDE

PLAYS

QUINNEYS'
SEARCHLIGHTS
JELF'S

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
NEW YORK

BLINKERS

A Romance of
the Preconceived Idea

BY

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

Author of
"The Fourth Dimension," "Whitewash,"
"Fishpingle," "Quinneys'," etc., etc.

NEW YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

COPYRIGHT, 1921,
BY GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

TO

LEON M. LION

MY DEAR LION:

I have dedicated this book to you, because you suggested the theme to me—A Romance of the Preconceived Idea, and here and there, although I have not asked you to revise a line, you will come across words of your own and a phrase or two which are yours. I make this acknowledgment gratefully and with sincere pleasure. Many themes are suggested to authors by their friends and acquaintances, but few, alas! can be used. You will remember that I jumped at this one with enthusiasm. I worked at it with a joy in the working that I can only hope has found its way into the book.

Yours very sincerely,

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL.

Lyndhurst, 1921.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	MIRANDA	11
II	AUNT BARBIE	33
III	THE VICARAGE	60
IV	ABSURD ISOLATION	80
V	AT MOSCOMBE	103
VI	ARIEL INTERFERES	123
VII	"PRETTY LADY M."	144
VIII	CONCERNING A BOOK-PLATE	165
IX	THE COLONEL SURRENDERS	179
X	THE MERRYTREES ARE THRILLED	200
XI	THE COLONEL'S ULTIMATUM	218
XII	PURDIE PLAYS PROXY	243
XIII	RALPH TEMPORIZES	265
XIV	THE COLONEL GOES TO MOSCOMBE	281
XV	EPILOGUE	297

BLINKERS

BLINKERS

CHAPTER I

MIRANDA

I

THE wind of adversity caught Miranda naked and ashamed: it blew tempestuously from her the undergarments of the mind, those filmly tissues which convention, not Nature, imposes upon the young. Some of us have witnessed the sudden stripping by the gale of a line of washing. In a jiffy, as if rejoicing in freedom from bondage, the various articles are whirled hither and thither upon the ambient air. A camisole may be picked up at sea by a wondering fisherman; a cambric handkerchief may be blown into the pocket of a tramp; a once immaculate petticoat is found in a dirty horse-pond!

It was so with Miranda. She recovered later on a few of her most intimate belongings. For the moment, as has been said, she stood naked before the blast.

Boreas had been let loose by a paternal aunt, who may be described as an ancient handmaiden of secretive disposition. Miranda's mother had died when Miranda was two years old. From that unhappy hour Miss Barbara Issell had taken charge of the two chil-

dren, Miranda and Adam. Adam was Miranda's father, and regarded by Miss Issell as a child in everything except years. In her considered judgment he would remain a child so long as he might live. Miranda—in spite of her absurd name—would grow up and become a woman. Women, according to Miss Issell, had to be practical; otherwise the race would become extinct. Being practical herself, she had objected to the name Miranda, dismissing it impatiently as "highfalutin." Argument was wasted upon Barbara Issell, but she prided herself upon giving way to unreasonable Man in small matters. Adam had pointed out to her that the child must be called Miranda. No other name was possible under the circumstances. Her belated arrival in this astounding world, coupled with the fact of her surprising parentage, evoked wonder.

From the first there were indications of the sprite. She belonged, obviously, to the elfin tribe, presenting even in the cradle idiosyncrasies summed up by Miss Issell as "queer." She held out tiny hands to dancing shadows; she gurgled with delight at sunbeams; she laughed at raindrops pattering upon her "pram." Later on, invisible playmates beguiled her leisure, and these were entertained handsomely by Adam, and admitted to the nursery on sufferance by Aunt Barbie with the consoling reflection that no extravagant demands were made upon the larder and store cupboard. Fairies did not clamour rudely for bread and butter and jam.

Miranda's real education, apart from what may be termed the arts and crafts of existence, began and ended under the ministering care and affection of her father. He happened to be a sage according to the lights vouch-

safed him, and his wisdom—if wisdom it was—will express itself in due time. He called himself artist and artisan, attempting, not too successfully, to sell wallpapers, some of which he designed himself. As an annex to his shop was a studio upon the walls of which hung pictures exciting curiosity rather than admiration. Adam said of them modestly: "They express me." Upon the peg of self-expression Mr. Issell hung his philosophy of life. Civilisation (so-called) cribbed the essential Ego, surrounded it, so the Sage contended, with a barbwire entanglement. Holding, as he did original views upon the conduct of life, why had he settled down in a suburb of Cronmouth amongst people hopelessly and helplessly the slaves of a smug environment?

On the eventful Wednesday, when the rains descended and the wind blew, Miranda had asked herself this insistent question. Possibly the author of her being deemed himself to be a Voice crying in a wilderness of red bricks and stucco. He adored beauty in all its Protean shapes. With him, upon memorable occasions, she had wandered through the great national museums and galleries. With him, a thousand times, she had escaped into the Forest of Ys, where beneath interlacing beeches he had held forth upon form and line and curve, contending that the finest work of dead and gone architects had been inspired by Nature's inimitable fan-vaulting of over-arching boughs.

Why did such a man live in Moscombe?

Why was he starving in Moscombe?

Starving! That was Aunt Barbie's word. Miranda had fled from it, like a nymph pursued by a satyr. She stood upon the shingly beach, staring at the face of the

waters, mutely beseeching the spirits of the deep to comfort her. At that moment she hated Moscombe and everything and everybody in it—except her father.

The spirits of the deep were not responsive to importunity. Miranda reflected that on such a dismal day the Nereids remained "below." Dancing wavelets, amethystine, opaline, might bear them ashore. Sea and skyscape of lead colour affrighted them.

"This is my affair," thought Miranda. "I must fight through on my own."

She knew, of course, that her beloved sire was not starving in the literal sense. And with his scorn of material things, it was impossible to blame him for hiding the truth from her. And what was the truth? She recalled with a tender smile what he said of it.

"There is no single point of Truth: only the sum of many points can give a steady light."

The sum of many points; the innumerable facets.

It grieved her that Aunt Barbie had computed this sum. Why had Miranda not put two and two together without extraneous help?

Vaguely, like all of us, she considered the effects of the War upon her father's business. For some time he had dispensed with an assistant in the shop. And soon after the armistice had been signed the general servant had been dismissed. She knew, further, that prices had soared out of sight.

Aunt Barbie had said much: and she had left much unsaid. Miranda tried to fill the lacunæ in the text. Probably, Aunt Barbie knew that she would do so. The ugly fact confronted a girl not yet twenty. She was a hindrance, not a help, to her own father, although he

would be the last man on earth to say so. Roughly speaking, in clothes, board and lodging, she was costing him about a hundred a year.

"I must do something," she reflected; "but what can I do?"

Two girls of her own age, schoolmates, were now earning a decent living: one as a typist and stenographer, the other as a seller of hats in a big Cronmouth emporium. The typist and stenographer had served a six months' apprenticeship before she was able to make a penny; the seller and trimmer of hats, inexperienced at first, had paid a premium to the proprietor of the emporium. Possibly he might accept Miss Issell. Could her father pay the premium? No.

Unblinkingly, she admitted that she had no aptitudes for any specialised work. And her education would hardly satisfy anxious mothers in quest of a nursery governess.

Having reached this conclusion, Miranda turned her back upon the English Channel. Not far from her father's shop was a registry office, kept by a widow who might be reckoned a friend and a competent adviser.

To talk with the widow became an instant necessity. Nevertheless, Miranda walked slowly to her objective, eyeing Moscombe malevolently. Moscombe had brought Adam Issell to a sorry pass. Cronmouth was nearly as bad. Considering its opportunities, and its amazing prosperity, it might be stigmatised as worse. Smugness overspread it like a pall. Stupid people lived stupid lives in stupid houses! Everybody kowtowed to the god of appearance; everything was cut and dried, desiccated by the well-stoked fires of respectability. Mos-

combe, of course, touched its cap to Cronmouth in and out of season. Suburb and town overlapped. But really an ocean divided them. Cronmouth refused to recognise Moscombe socially. The wife, let us say, of a retired tradesman living in Moscombe might do her shopping in Cronmouth, but, invariably, she would give her address in a whisper to the supercilious young gentleman in a frock coat who was booking her order, hoping that he wouldn't repeat in a derisive tone:

"Oh, Moscombe! Certainly, madam, we will give instructions that the goods shall be delivered in—a—Moscombe!"

Miranda knew that sentiment kept her father in a ridiculous town where he was neither honoured as an artist nor appreciated as an artisan. Passing the houses near the sea, she thought of the wall-papers so exquisitely designed that did not hang in them. In London Adam Issell might have achieved fame and fortune. But Fate ordained that he should spend a brief holiday at Moscombe. His wife had fallen ill there. She died and was buried. The unhappy husband could not wrench himself away. Later, with unflinching optimism, he had affirmed that Moscombe needed him and his ideas. And beyond Moscombe, within easy cycling distance, stretched the noble Forest of Ys

II

Miranda drank tea with the lady who kept the registry office, and absorbed gratefully a Sally Lunn and advice quite as good. Mrs. Paxton had no time to waste.

"You can go into service, Miranda."

"Yes; that had occurred to me."

"You have learned most of the work at home; you are quick-witted and observant. I will find you a parlourmaid's place, close by. You won't be entirely cut off from your father. But, will he object?"

"I don't think so."

"Personally I see nothing derogatory in service, and your father shares my view."

"Yes, he does."

"Talk with him, and come back to me to-morrow."

Miranda nodded.

"Thank you," she said softly. "Speaking to Daddy will be a matter of form. I shall come back to-morrow." Mrs. Paxton had expected protest. She eyed Miranda affectionately, conscious, possibly, that advice when offered to and taken by the young involves a measure of responsibility. Also, she was attempting to envisage Miranda in cap and apron waiting, it is true, upon gentlefolk, but at the mercy, perhaps, of some rough-tongued cook fashioned out of different clay. It occurred to her that porcelain and pottery did not "mix."

"You are very pretty, child."

Miranda smiled.

"Not really pretty, Mrs. Paxton."

"You have charm, my dear. That counts immensely everywhere. I wish I could find you more congenial employment, but you have no specialty."

"I know; and I won't remain a burden upon Daddy."

"You are prepared for—for disagreeables?"

"I must take the rough with the smooth."

With that she went her way.

It is worth recording that she hurried home to a father whose face would brighten at the sight of her. She

walked best when she walked swiftly, carrying a high head delicately poised above slender shoulders. Men glanced at her as she passed them by. No one challenged her attention. No woman is insensible of her power to attract, but so far Miranda had never exercised this power consciously. The young men of her own class in Moscombe fluttered about her, singed their wings slightly, and flitted elsewhere. She preferred the society of her father's friends, men of ripe age, who smoked many pipes with the Sage, and helped to educate his daughter. Even in Moscombe there were half a dozen Bohemians who disdained their environment the more, perhaps, because they were unable to escape from it.

Miranda paused before entering the shop. It boasted but one window. And in that window was set forth one strip only of wall-paper. In a previous incarnation, Adam may have been a Japanese. He contended that a thing of beauty was a joy in itself, to be considered by itself. Successful sellers of wall-papers do not share these Oriental views. And, if they hold them secretly, they do not impose them upon possible customers. Very soon we shall behold Adam as a salesman; for the moment we approach him as the father of Miranda.

When the girl pushed open the door of the shop, a bell tinkled melodiously. Adam, at work in the studio, would hear the bell, and fare forth to greet customers. Instantly, his alert eyes would "take in" the stranger. As instantly he would decide what sort of wall-paper would serve best as a background for the man or woman standing before him.

He bustled in, as usual, and surveyed his master-piece

proudly. In his eyes she was so exactly right that it became a benediction to gaze at her.

"Where has my ladybird been?"

"I had tea with Mrs. Paxton. Is anybody in the studio, Daddy?"

"Only the Captain."

Miranda blushed. Anybody else, except Adam, would have noticed the blush, which, however, vanished swiftly, as she asked calmly:

"Is he buying wall-papers?"

"You know that he comes here to talk with me."

Miranda was not quite sure of this, but she dared not say so. Captain Somervell had drifted into the shop some weeks before. Undoubtedly Adam had entertained him. We have the young fellow's word that at first he looked upon the paper designer as a "card." Incidentally, he bought a wall-paper and paid for it. But this happened after he met Miranda. Being a gentleman, he treated the girl with the same courtesy he showed to maidens of his own class. Indeed, he behaved with such discretion that a wiser than Miranda might have taken for granted that the Sage's talk really allured him. We have no reason for supposing it didn't, but once or twice Miranda had surprised a pair of grey eyes taking stock of herself, appraising her leisurely, with a detachment difficult to analyse. And yet he talked to her as he talked to her father, with a pleasing diffidence which disarmed criticism. At the second visit to the studio, he had said positively:

"This is Bohemia, but you are all so clean."

Whereupon the Sage replied briskly:

"You young men think Bohemia is a place above whose

portals is written—'Abandon soap all ye who enter here.' I believe in soap. Our motto is—'Abandon starch.'"

Ralph Somervell had laughed.

Warmed by laughter, the Sage had continued:

"Mind you, soap is like money; excellent for cleaning up the dirt of life, but, as a dominating factor, who wants to live his life in lather?"

Shortly after the shop bell had tinkled. Adam vanished. Somervell said pleasantly:

"Your father is a wonderful man, Miss Issell."

Conviction informed his tones.

Miranda agreed with him.

"He has been wonderful to me."

"Tell me," he murmured.

Nothing loath, Miranda spoke of his unfailing devotion with an eloquence which justified in Somervell the conclusion that powers of speech were an heirloom in the Issell family. His own people were not talkers, and "wonderful," as an adjective, could hardly be applied to them. When Miranda stopped suddenly, as if aware that she had said too much, the young man expressed a wish that his father might meet her father.

"And then," he added, "the dear old governor would get a notion of what a tongue can do."

Adam came back into the studio presently, and invited Captain Somervell to drop in again, an invitation sympathetically given and accepted. The Somervells lived at Chorley in the Forest. Captain Somervell was on leave. Also he was getting a mare fit for the buck-hunting in August. He bade father and daughter a gay "au revoir."

III

Miranda followed her father into the studio.

She found Somervell, in riding kit, smoking a pipe. And immediately she was conscious of regarding him with different eyes. Perhaps, when he greeted her, he was sensible of a subtle change. How could he divine that a prospective parlourmaid was shaking hands with a squire's son?

Adam said joyously:

"Captain Somervell has bought a picture."

"Which?" asked Miranda.

The question upset the young man. As a cricketer he realised that he was "stumped." He had bought a picture, for the same reasons that lay behind the purchase of so many rolls of wall-paper. But he couldn't identify his purchase. Issell saved an awkward situation.

"That one."

Miranda followed a raised forefinger. But the picture was seen through a mist of unshed tears. She had been given barely a glimpse of Somervell's confusion; it sufficed. She knew that the picture had been bought out of pity not on its merits. She heard her father's voice.

"It's one of the best."

Miranda shivered inwardly. She knew what was expected of her—the grand acclaim. She could acclaim her sire's work as a designer of wall-papers; she shared, enthusiastically, his philosophy of life, but his pictures were inarticulate, unintelligible. Long ago, she had realised what they meant to him: self-expression. And in a tragical sense they did express the man who had

failed, technically, to achieve material success. As a child she had seen these pictures with his eyes, accepting without question his interpretation of them. But that was long before she had been taken to the famous galleries, where the works of great artists had revealed themselves without comment or explanation.

She said quickly:

"Yes; it's one of your best, Daddy."

He regarded them all as his "best."

"The fall of the leaf," exclaimed Adam.

"The fall of the artist," thought Miranda.

Captain Somervell said valiantly:

"You have conveyed the sense of decay."

Adam seized this kindly remark, and proceeded to worry it.

"You adopt the preconceived idea."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Issell?"

Adam continued excitedly:

"We are all victims of the preconceived idea. I suggest to you, for example, that this picture indicates the fall of the leaf, and at once you sense decay. Is it not so?"

"Well—yes."

"What do you think of my daughter?"

A survivor of the Retreat from Mons hesitated. Adam was delighted.

"You think her all that a good daughter should be?"

"I do."

"And so she is. But—suppose that I interpolated the preconceived idea? If, before you met her, I had warped your judgment? Had I whispered to you: 'This girl is a convicted thief'?"

"When I met her, I should not have believed it."

"Believe me—you would. I read the other day—I forget where—that the secret of life lies in forming right judgments from insufficient data. Nearly all data are insufficient. You see my point?"

"I see it," said Somervell slowly.

"See it and apply it. The preconceived idea is the curse of civilisation. It lies like a blight upon this place. Men here are not accepted at their true valuation for what they are, but for what they appear to be. I am labelled as a paper-hanger."

"Not by me, Mr. Issell."

"Thanks. There are exceptions, thank God! even here. As a matter of fact I don't hang papers, but I have. I began at the bottom of the ladder, holding a paste-pot. I have hung some of the ugliest papers in the world."

"You have designed beauties."

"Thanks again, Captain. All artists thirst for encouragement. But I'm honest, as Miranda will tell you."

Miranda smiled faintly.

"Dear Daddy, you are too honest."

Adam Issell waved his pipe in protest. He turned to Somervell apologetically:

"There spoke Moscombe! I don't design my papers, Captain."

Somervell exhibited surprise, glancing at Miranda, who shrugged her shoulders.

"Really? I understood from your daughter that you did."

"Nature designed 'em. I get everything from Nature—

colour, form, pattern, line and curve. Where's my snowflake chintz?"

Miranda found it in a book of patterns. Somervell praised it, as well he might, but Miranda exclaimed fiercely:

"I hate that chintz because it was stolen from Daddy."

"Through my own indolence, Ladybird. Yes; it was stolen from me, Captain. It might have been a stepping-stone to Fortune. In its day that chintz was famous. But the firm I was working for gobbled it. Never mind that!"

"But I do—I do," wailed Miranda, thinking of cap and apron.

"Tut—tut! I hit upon that design by chance. I saw, through a microscope, a snowflake magnified. I placed that magnified snowflake upon a grey-blue background. That was my first inspiration. I followed it up."

"Daddy, you didn't. You let it go."

Adam Issell paused, regarding his daughter with slightly troubled eyes. It was unlike her to criticise him before others. Possibly, he guessed that something was distressing her, and he knew, of course, that being a creature of curves she could not keep to what he termed the straight lines of life. He patted her cheek.

"You have thrown me out of my stride. Where was I?"

He appealed naïvely to Somervell, who was thinking: "This clever old chap is as simple as a child." He said aloud: "You were speaking of your first inspiration, Mr. Issell."

"Yes, yes; so I was. Well, ever since I have stuck

tight to Dame Nature. Now, I'll show you something else. But perhaps you are bored?"

"Do I look bored?"

Issell did not reply hastily. Instead, he stared so keenly at the young man that the glance penetrated.

"You are not bored," he declared. "Wait!"

He hurried into a dusty corner of the studio. Miranda sat down. Somervell whispered to her:

"The more I see of your father, the more he astonishes me."

Miranda beamed at him, as she whispered back:

"He astonishes me. I am sorry I seemed to criticise him just now. Really, you know, he is above criticism."

"You mean that genius takes its own line?"

"Yes, I do. He *is* a genius, Captain Somervell."

"I am quite sure of that," he replied heartily. "And recognition must come his way."

"If it did——"

She sighed. The sigh inflamed a young man who was not tinder to cheap emotions. Outwardly, he remained cool, presenting the impassive mask of a soldier on duty. But, inwardly, he was aware that what Issell termed the preconceived idea had been thrust into the melting pot. As a boy he had teemed with preconceived ideas. The War, certainly, had knocked many of them on the head. They lay in the dust of the trenches, dead as Queen Anne. Some few still lingered. He was surveying these, derisively, as his host returned, lugging with him a curious piece of apparatus.

"Now, Captain, I am going to show you one of Nature's conjuring tricks."

He brandished above the apparatus what appeared to

be a large pewter sugar castor. Upon a small stand was poised a round and gleaming sheet of steel.

"I powder this with chalk."

He did so deftly. Then he put down the castor, and drew from his pocket a small tuning fork which he attached to the rim of the steel plate. Under the plate hung a violin bow. Issell seized the bow, and waved it dramatically, as if it were a bâton in the hands of a famous *chef d'orchestre.* With a brave flourish, he drew it across the tuning fork.

"C major," he announced.

The thin steel disc vibrated. As it did so the chalk upon the polished surface formed a magical pattern.

"Sound, Captain, as you will see, produces form."

Captain Somervell, with a vocabulary none too copious, announced solemnly that he was "blowed."

"I have used that pattern. If I substitute another tuning fork, I get a different pattern—ad infinitum."

"Simply amazing!"

"Nature. Stand up, Ladybird!"

Miranda obeyed.

"What do you think of that frock? I am not speaking of the cut, but of the colour scheme."

Somervell answered cautiously:

"It seems a bit of quite all right, Mr. Issell."

Adam chuckled slyly.

"That I take to be superlative praise from a man of action rather than words."

"I like the frock most awfully."

"Miranda," said her father, "is a brunette, and a thought too pale. Inferior butcher's meat, so her aunt says. We thought out that frock last autumn in the

bracken. It is a study of faded brackens, stalk and leaf. No milliner can beat Nature in these delicate combinations of tint."

"I'm glad you like my frock," murmured Miranda.

"I like what's in it," nearly escaped from his lips. A distant clock chimed the hour of six. Somervell feared that he would be late for dinner, the unpardonable sin in his father's house. He took leave of his hosts, apologising for a too protracted visit.

"Not at all," declared Adam. "Shall I send the picture to Chorley House?"

"May I leave it where it is for a little time? At the end of my leave, I rejoin my regiment in India. I shall take it with me, and—and the wall-paper."

"India? I envy you."

"My father wants me to exchange into a home regiment."

"And will you?" asked Miranda.

"I—I don't know—yet."

IV

Adam opened the shop door for his visitor, locked it after his departure, and put up the shutters. Then he returned to the studio, where he found Miranda awaiting him with an odd expression upon her face. Singularly alert in regard to anything that might concern her, he attempted to interpret the drooping mouth and downcast eyes. Abhorring hasty and undigested conclusions, he busied himself in putting away his pattern apparatus. Then he sat down opposite to the girl, and refilled his pipe. A horrible misgiving had assailed him. Was it absurd fancy, or had Miranda winced when the word

"India" escaped from a firm pair of lips? Ought he to have allowed his girl to meet this attractive young man? He was fully sensible that a mother would have asked herself this question before and not after the possibility of mischief. And he believed secretly, hugging the illusion to his breast, that he had played mother to his little Miranda. We may admit frankly that he had done nothing of the sort. In a rough and ready fashion, Aunt Barbie, whom we shall meet presently, had exercised maternal activities. Aunt Barbie, however, was too concerned at the moment with domestic economies to waste time, as she put it, in the studio. She had not even met Captain Somervell, and spoke, generically, of "the military" as popinjays. Miranda loved her austere aunt, but she did not confide in her.

Adam went on smoking his pipe in silence. He was summing up Ralph Somervell, groping for that right judgment based upon insufficient data, which he held to be the secret of life. In his turn he became the slave of the preconceived idea. This young fellow belonged to an ancient family that might be described as extinguished rather than distinguished. The Somervells were types not personalities. Adam Issell was familiar with the type. Cronmouth held scores of retired colonels and civilians whose names might be found in "Burke's Landed Gentry." They wandered, not too often, as far as Moscombe, and entered his modest establishment. It was quite impossible to impose a suitable wall-paper upon them. In them, however, Adam acknowledged the grace of good manners. This young captain, for instance, had a "way" with him: he listened courteously; he was modest about his own achievements, although D.S.O. was tacked

to his name; he had generous and kindly instincts. But he must be a dyed-in-the-blue reactionary with all the prejudices and disabilities of his class. Surely his girl, saturated with his ideas, was not such a fool as to be interested in him except as an agreeable passing acquaintance.

Issell had reached this point in his reflections when Miranda broke into considered speech.

"I have been talking with Aunt Barbie."

"What about?"

"Ways and means, Daddy."

"Um."

Adam frowned, puffing too hard at his pipe. Miranda's nervous manner reassured him. He decided, too hastily, that she was not interested in an attractive reactionary, but he decided, also, quite as quickly, that the nice adjustment of ways and means presented a problem far beyond her. He would have a word with Barbara, good creature, later on. Meanwhile, let the child decant herself. He prepared himself for a gush of lemonade with the sugar left out.

"I cost you, Daddy, about a hundred a year."

"Do you?" He could see that Miranda was upset, almost on the verge of tears. Intuitively, he coined a few phrases intended for Barbara. "Well, what of it?"

"It comes to this: you can't afford me."

"What a tale!"

At rare moments, when he was grievously undermined by the unexpected, Adam Issell relapsed into the Doric of his youth. As a rule, he was a seeker of the right word and phrase.

"It's a tale," declared Miranda firmly, "that must be wagged between you and me, here and now."

He replied testily:

"If you insist about talking to me about my own private affairs, I can't prevent you. Times are bad. Business is slack. But we aren't on the rocks yet."

"We shall be if I don't earn my own living."

"Earn your own living? How?"

He stood up, and began to pace the room. Incidentally, his pipe went out and fell presently from a limp hand upon a shabby rug. He realised that he was about to be hoist with his own petard. Miranda would quote him against himself. For this, indeed, was his *cheval de bataille*. Firm in the saddle, he had shivered many a lance against the idle rich, against all and sundry who waxed fat in idleness.

"As a parlourmaid."

"My God! As a *parlourmaid——!*"

"Why not?"

He bit his trembling lips.

"You have preached to me the doctrine of work. According to you, Daddy, no work, if it be honestly done, is humiliating to the worker. You were perfectly furious the other day, because you read in the paper that young girls were too proud to take service. I remember what you said."

"Do you?"

"And, of course, the fact that it is so, the fact that there is a big demand for servants, even unskilled servants, is my opportunity. I can get a good place without difficulty."

"You have upset me, Ladybird, you have indeed. I didn't educate you to become a parlourmaid."

"It seems to me that you did. You certainly swept a lot of cobwebs out of my mind about service. I don't feel as those silly girls you read about. I'm sure that I should take pride in cleaning silver properly, polishing my glass, and not smashing the crockery."

"A parlourmaid——!"

"If you can suggest anything else?"

"But I can. You can stay here and help me. You can sell wall-papers and give me more time to design 'em."

She hated to hurt him. Desperately, she stammered out:

"Where are our customers, dear? Since Amos left" (Amos had been the name of the assistant) "our customers seem to have melted away. Amos sold them, I know, the papers you hate, but they were the papers wanted. I know exactly how you feel. I am miserable because your best work is—not appreciated. But there it is. I—I can't be a burden on you."

Her soft voice died away. Adam paused in his ambulations to stare at her delicately modelled face and limbs. Civil war devastated him. But he knew that she was right. He knew further that being a creature of sensibility, and a girl with a strong will of her own, she would do what she deemed to be right. To that end he had fashioned her. And yet, he was ravaged by his impotence to shelter her. Till this bitter moment he had scarcely realised his tragic failure not as an artist, to whom the joy of working sufficed, but as artisan. He stood before her a broken man, inarticulate with dismay.

The sight of him, slowly disintegrating, made her burst into tears.

"I don't want to go," she sobbed, "but I must, Daddy, and you know that I must."

He comforted her with kisses and caresses, but he could find no words to gainsay her resolution.

CHAPTER II

AUNT BARBIE

I

MIRANDA, after dealing faithfully with her father, approached Miss Issell, whom she found preparing the evening meal in a kitchen as clean and well-ordered as the lady who reigned supreme there. Before leaving school, a select seminary in Moscombe, Miranda had recognised in this austere relative great qualities of ministration and administration. Already it had occurred to her that Providence, so to speak, kept a special stock of aunties apportioned amongst helpless mortals who, lacking their services, would perish prematurely. And women like Miss Issell must be regarded as "fixtures," indispensable. Possibly—so Miranda reflected—and as object lessons of the law of compensation, such devoted servants became immune to the common infirmities of life. Aunt Barbie was never ill or ailing. She never complained of headache or toothache. Once, as a tiny child, Miranda had asked her solemnly:

"Doesn't Mr. Pain come to see you sometimes, Auntie?"

To this Miss Issell replied trenchantly:

"I have no leisure, child, to entertain Mr. Pain."

Miranda would then suck her thumb in silent introspection till rebuked for doing so. Whys and wherefores

were wasted upon Miss Issell, who had no ear for plaintive notes of interrogation. In self-defence, however, appreciating grimly the insidiousness of childish importunity, Aunt Barbie would say:

"Don't ask me, ask your father."

Miranda, good obedient child, did so. Adam Issell answered all questions exhaustively, but in language not so easy to understand. Again and again Miranda, listening to her sire, would store up his startling comments, using them with telling effect upon others. Habitually she used his phrases in the long and intimate conversations which she held with her imaginary playmates. Even they accepted Mr. Issell's dicta as unanswerable.

The child might have been some eleven years old when she began to wonder why God had given such a sister as Aunt Barbie to her father. They seemed to have nothing in common except love for herself. She knew intuitively that Aunt Barbie loved her, although she never said so. But her father's love was the sweeter, because he gave it vocal expression.

Miranda carried some woolwork into the kitchen. She knitted beautifully and indefatigably. Aunt Barbie approved this. Work kept young girls out of mischief. Also, she deigned to talk with workers when at work herself.

"I have seen Mrs. Paxton," said Miranda. Not waiting for a reply, she went on hurriedly: "After what you said this afternoon, I had to see her. Every word of yours, Auntie, sunk in, but I was too flustered to tell you that. And, really and truly, I had no idea that things were as bad as they are."

Aunt Barbie nodded. But, for the moment, she

accepted Mrs. Paxton as a friend, not as a competent woman of business.

"Mrs. Paxton can find me a place."

Miss Issell uttered a monosyllable strictly forbidden to Miranda.

"What?"

Miranda smiled faintly. Her aunt had upset her with plain speech. Now, in turn, the smiter was smitten.

"I think, Aunt Barbie, that I shall make rather a nice parlourmaid."

Aunt Barbie glanced at the range. A saucepan held the Issell supper. What was in it simmered comfortably. The vegetables might be trusted to attend to themselves for a few minutes. So Aunt Barbie sat down on a Windsor chair and stared at her niece. She could remember exactly what she had said to her. But there was nothing, in her opinion, to justify a professional visit to Mrs. Paxton. Deliberately, the elder woman had stripped from the girl those airy tissues which we have discreetly spoken of as mental underwear. Unquestionably, the poor child had been educated beyond her station in life. That was entirely the father's fault. Excuses might be made for him inasmuch as he had been fool enough to marry out of his station in life. And Miranda, in many ways, "took after" a mother who was so unfit for this workaday world that she drifted out of it, inconsequently, as a child wanders over a precipice. The daughter of two dreamers must not be allowed to dream. Accordingly, she had pinched her, shaken her up a bit, dashing the cold water of common sense into blinking eyes.

"Fiddle!"

"I expect to get a quiet place to-morrow."

Aunt Barbie hesitated a moment, and then let herself go.

"This is the result of your poor father's teaching. He is moonstruck, always was. As for the dignity of labour, I'm heartily sick of it. Service——! I can't see you as a parlourmaid."

"But you will," murmured Miranda.

Secretly, she was enjoying the discomfiture of a veteran. She knew that her formidable aunt held servant-maids, by and large, as poor white trash. Indeed, when their own "general" had been dismissed, Miss Issell had smiled grimly.

"Sit down, child! I won't have you, a chit of a girl, smiling down on me. Is this a stupid joke?"

Miranda answered frankly:

"I suppose, Aunt Barbie, I shall try to get what fun I can out of it. I feel like Columbus, when he sniffed a new and unknown world in front of him."

"Sit you down, I say."

"I am sorry you are upset." Miranda sat primly erect upon another Windsor chair, and went on knitting. Her needles clicked aggressively.

"Stop knitting!" commanded the autocrat.

Miranda obeyed. The injunction, so unexpected, removed the smile from her lips. Evidently her aunt regarded this as a serious crisis.

"Have you spoken to your father?"

"Yes; he is miserable, poor darling, but he sees it from a practical point of view."

"You dare to tell me, *me,* that I don't."

"You don't yet."

"What does it lead to—service?"

The imp in Miranda cocked a snook at discretion.

"It might lead to marriage with a rich old bachelor."

Miss Issell, in moments of concentration, was insensible to humour. And she was aware that Miranda read novels.

"This is too much. You are thinking of accepting a parlourmaid's place in a bachelor's household?"

"I suppose I shall have to take what I can get."

Miss Issell began a long indictment of servant maids as they appeared to her *en masse* as post-war Bolsheviks masquerading in coney seal coats and sham silk stockings. We need not repeat what she said. Miranda listened soberly. When the freshet of vituperation became an interjectional trickle, she said sweetly:

"Dear Auntie, having been brought up by you, I should not come home with the milkman. And I hope that I shall put my wages into a stocking, or the bank, not into hats. This seems to me the only way out of a dark wood. You can 'do' for father, as you always have done. I am a burden on him and you. You say that this is a result of Daddy's teaching. And of yours. You haven't an idle bone in your body. I don't want to be a parlourmaid. But I have done parlour work at home. I shall catch on to the parlour tricks. I wish I could see myself doing something else, but I can't. Can you?"

Miss Issell remained silent, as her active mind ranged far and wide in search of a more suitable "place" for her niece. Peregrinations ended, heatedly, outside not inside a factory. As a land girl, as a chauffeuse, as a "shoppie," as a typist, as a governess she failed, dishearteningly, to see Miranda.

"I follow the straight line, Aunt Barbie. I can walk straight from here to Mrs. Paxton's. By doing so I save Daddy a hundred a year. I regard this as an adventure."

Miss Issell said acidly:

"Misadventure."

"That remains to be seen."

Miss Issell rose majestically, and strode to her saucepans.

II

Next day, Miranda sought Mrs. Paxton as soon as the office was open, and asked her friend to find her a "nice place."

"Town or country, my dear?"

"As near Daddy as may be, please, but not in Moscombe. I have been reminded, Mrs. Paxton, and by Aunt Barbara of all people in the world, that I am an Issell. What that means exactly I don't know. What does it feel like to be an Issell? Really I am asking for information."

"Your aunt, I gather, is against this move."

"She is. The dignity of labour doesn't appeal to her. She hurled at my head last night a sort of bomb. I have always known vaguely that my mother was a gentlewoman."

"Looking at you, Miranda, I am quite sure of it."

"We are all ladies now."

Mrs. Paxton amended the rash statement.

"Possibly; we are not all gentlewomen."

Miranda continued pensively: "Aunt Barbie, I am quite sure, was angry with Daddy because he married above him. That is absurd. Nobody could be above

Daddy. However, Auntie prides herself on accepting facts. In an odd sort of way, peculiarly her own, she is quite bucked that I have gentle blood in me. And she has rubbed it well in that Daddy won a big prize as a designer of chintzes and wall-papers. That was when he worked in London for a famous firm. When he ran away with Mother. . . ."

"Ran away, did he?" interrupted Mrs. Paxton.

"I thought you knew. Yes; it was a romantic affair. But, according to Auntie, that ruined him. He had to go on his own. And Auntie says that men like Daddy can't go on their own. I shouldn't mention what she says to you, but somehow it explains my being an Issell. You may laugh, but Auntie has taken this worse than Father. She thinks it terrible that an Issell should be a parlourmaid. I don't share her views, but I respect them. I shall call myself Wensdy, because I became a woman yesterday. Can you find a nice quiet place for M. Wensdy?"

"I shall do my best, dear. You're a plucky girl, and almost unreasonably sensible."

Together matron and maid scanned the "Wanted" ledger. Some of Mrs. Paxton's comments were illuminating, accounting, perhaps, for her modest success as middle woman.

"I try to suit maid and mistress. That woman can't keep a servant more than six weeks. A good sort with a bad temper. Here is a pincher. I despair of her. What is this? 'Parlourmaid of exceptional appearance, second of three.' No, no—a rowdy house. Here we are! Mrs. Browett. You have heard of Browett's Blend?"

"I have tasted it," said Miranda.

"I think I shall try Mrs. Browett. She is on the 'phone, and sure to be in. Wait here."

Within a few minutes she returned, smiling.

"Mrs. Browett will see you at once. Take the tram as far as The Corner, Cronmouth. The Browett mansion is on The Drive. And it is called 'The Deodars.' You can't miss it. Go to the tradesmen's entrance and say that you have come to see Mrs. Browett by appointment. Best of luck!"

Miranda nodded briskly. Within twenty-five minutes she was staring curiously at "The Deodars." It was a house of pretension, so Miranda reflected, the house of a famous advertiser, and, like his tea, a blend. Several orders of architecture, the Pseudo-Gothic, the Palladian, the Tudor, presented a bewildering façade to the critical eye. Smooth lawns and smug shrubs encompassed it.

Miranda rang the servants' bell. It was answered, not too quickly, by a kitchenmaid. At sight of Miranda, she said, respectfully:

"This is not the front door, miss."

Miranda smiled at her.

"I have come by appointment to see Mrs. Browett about taking a place as parlourmaid."

Instantly, the kitchenmaid altered her voice and manner.

"Well, I never! Parlourmaid. Step in, please."

Miranda stepped into a passage and thence into a comfortable sitting-room. The kitchenmaid vanished. Miranda glanced about her. Obviously, Mrs. Browett counted upon comfort as a net wherein to hold servants. There were easy-chairs, books, writing materials, and a cheerful outlook from snugly-curtained windows.

"This is what they call a good place," thought Miranda.

Another maid appeared, spick and span.

"Mrs. Browett will see you in the library."

"Thank you."

For an instant the two girls looked at each other.

"I'm leaving," said the maid, "but you won't get my place."

The maid's manner was not offensive, but she spoke with odd conviction.

"Why not?"

"You'll see. Come along!"

Miranda followed her through a large hall and into a room which was called the library because a few ponderous volumes were locked up in glass cases. It smelt strongly of leather and cigars. The maid said primly:

"The young person, madam, from Mrs. Paxton's."

An opulent-looking lady, wearing valuable pearls, invited Miranda to take a chair. Miranda did so, and, conscious of sharp scrutiny, discreetly lowered her eyelids. She could see the pattern of the carpet, which had not been designed by Nature. She was wondering what hideous concatenation of sound could produce such a pattern, when she heard Mrs. Browett's voice.

"You are inexperienced, so Mrs. Paxton tells me."

"Is that a serious disability?" asked Miranda anxiously.

Mrs. Browett elevated her brows. "Disability" from the lips of a putative parlourmaid dismayed her. Miranda went on, as if she were talking to her father: "I am not exactly untrained, madam. You can trust me with valuable glass and china. I can keep silver as it ought to be kept." In her eagerness to convince, she

pulled off a neat glove and extended her hand. "It isn't a clumsy hand, is it?"

Mrs. Browett said pleasantly:

"It's a very nice, capable hand. And Mrs. Paxton tells me that she has known you for fifteen years. In fact she urged me to give you a trial, although this is your first place."

"I shall try to please you, madam."

Mrs. Browett stood up; Miranda rose with her. Already she liked Mrs. Browett. Above the mantelpiece was a portrait of Mr. Browett, in the imposing robes of an alderman of the City of London. He, too, diffused a sort of glow, a beaming geniality. Their house was a house of many windows, as Miranda had observed from the outside. Mr. Browett, probably, spoke of it as a sun-trap. And, passing through the hall, Miranda heard jolly voices and laughter.

"You do please me," said Mrs. Browett, in a maternal voice, "but I can't engage you."

"Oh, madam!"

The dismay in face and voice moved Mrs. Browett to entire frankness. Perhaps she realised that she could not cope with this intelligent girl in argument. Nor could she dissemble with her.

"You are too attractive, my dear, to be my parlour-maid. Why, bless me! my boys might fall in love with you." She laughed naturally, lightly touching Miranda's soft cheek. "Now, cheer up! You will find another place quite easily. But—excuse the question!—must you go into domestic service?"

"Yes, madam."

"I see you as a companion to some nice old lady."

Miranda said miserably:

"The nice old ladies can't afford companions. The income tax hits them harder than any other class, doesn't it?"

"I suppose it does," admitted Mrs. Browett.

She held out a soft plump hand, with too many rings on it.

The interview was over.

III

A week passed before Miranda secured a "place." And it was not in Cronmouth. The Vicar of Medbery-Hawthorne wanted a parlourmaid. Medbery-Hawthorne lies between Moscombe and the Forest of Ys to the south of Sloden-Pauncefort. In this instance, Miranda didn't see either the Vicar or his wife. She was engaged on the recommendation of Mrs. Paxton.

"It's a nice quiet place. No children; three indoor servants; very little entertaining. You can cycle to your father's house in three-quarters of an hour."

Miranda was delighted.

"Twenty-five pounds a year, and your washing. Three weeks' holiday, one afternoon off a week, and every other Sunday. They want you in two weeks."

"I'm ever so much obliged, dear Mrs. Paxton."

"I hope," said Mrs. Paxton, "that you won't frighten them."

"But why should I frighten them?"

"You frightened poor Mrs. Browett. She told me, I can't remember her exact words, that your vocabulary was disconcerting."

"I shall practise talking in words of one syllable," said Miranda.

By this time both Adam Issell and his sister were resigned to a lamentable situation. Adam, indeed, amazing optimist, made the best of it, fortified by his philosophy.

"You have been schooled by me, child, in the arts of painting and paper-designing; you have a just appreciation of the straight lines of life. This must be regarded as a fugitive experience. You will confront valiantly not new truths—there are no new truths—but new facts. The old truths are merely rediscovered, even as the old lies are recoined with all their base alloy. The universe is a clock and human ideas are compressed into a pendulum which swings across the orbit of Time."

"Rubbish!" ejaculated Aunt Barbie.

"On these matters, Barbara," said Mr. Issell, "we do not see eye to eye."

"What new facts am I likely to discover, Daddy, in Medbery-Hawthorne?"

"The essential difference between yourself, in a new environment, and your employers and your fellow-servants."

"It's rather exciting."

"Life, if it be lived fully, is exciting. Unfold your wings, Ladybird, to all new impressions."

"And then she will fly away home," said Aunt Barbie.

"Once a week," said Miranda, "and every other Sunday."

Aunt Barbie sniffed, a habit she condemned in others.

"The child's fellow-servants will expect her to 'walk-out' with a young man."

"Will they?" asked Miranda.

"My daughter," said Adam, "will walk the high road, not the low."

"I hope so," said Aunt Barbie.

Already Miranda had written a letter to Mrs. Merrytree, the wife of the Vicar of Medbery-Hawthorne, signed "M. Wensdy." Adam Issell had protested; Aunt Barbie approved. To Miranda, the adoption of a *nom de guerre* lent a spice to the adventure. Also, it appealed to her sense of the ridiculous. She said to Aunt Barbie:

"I shall be a dual personality. Once a week I shall experience all the thrills of being an Issell. What will it feel like to be Wensdy? Will they call me Wensdy?"

"They will call you anything they please. In a country vicarage servants, I presume, are called by their Christian names."

"You don't consider Miranda to be a Christian name?"

"I don't."

"I ought to live up to my name, but I wonder whether I do."

"One thing is certain," observed Miss Issell. "Service will drive a lot of nonsense out of your pate."

A cardboard box and a letter for Miss Wensdy reached Miranda in care of Mrs. Paxton. The box held a simple cap and apron, and a pattern of dress material, cinnamon brown in colour; the letter was as follows:

To Miss M. Wensdy:—I shall expect you to arrive at the Vicarage between tea and dinner. Your duties will begin next morning. I am sending you a sample cap and apron such as the Vicar wishes you to wear in the mornings. I provide a smarter cap, of the old mob pattern, and a pretty apron for the afternoons. You will bring the ordinary black dress and your prints. The Vicar prefers plain prints. If you have not bought these, you would please your master if you selected a quiet

quaker grey. I also send you a roll of brown material, which you will have made up. This will be worn by you when I am entertaining friends. The Vicar hopes that you do your hair simply. He likes his maids to be exceptionally neat *and clean*. We expect you on the 20th of July.

ANNABELLA MERRYTREE.

Miranda submitted this epistle to her father, who examined it as if it were a document of engrossing interest. Miranda concentrated her attention upon the box and what was in it.

"Good notepaper," observed Mr. Issell, "and a well-written, well-expressed letter. The Vicar appears in it prominently. We may assume that he is master of his small household. Mrs. Merrytree is not a superman. The words of the letter are exactly spaced. At the Vicarage, Ladybird, you may expect to find everything in its place."

"Including the parlourmaid," said Miranda.

"At the same time," pursued Mr. Issell, "we must guard against the preconceived idea. These worthy people may be quite other than we deem them to be from the very insufficient data in our possession. Man is subject to many influences seen and unseen. The unseen —especially with parsons—are the more potent. And the half-seen the most fearful. We put blinkers on our friend the horse, so that the half-seen things shall not distract and terrify him, but I have always contended that blinkers do not serve their purpose. I would scrap all blinkers, especially the blinkers made for man and worn by him so slavishly. Opaque and wellnigh indestructible, they are symbols of the preconceived idea. Once that idea is brought to birth and accepted, it becomes fixed so firmly on the eyes of the mind that only

a cataclysm can remove it. It may keep terror and distraction from our path, child, but it shuts out other things. The adventurous soul itches to remove them, to see everything—at all hazards. Are you listening to me, Miranda?"

"Daddy, dear, I have all that by heart."

"Repetition—as Napoleon the Great remarked truly—is the first figure of rhetoric. What I have just said can hardly be repeated too often."

Miranda nodded, and exhibited the dress material.

"This is my colour, Daddy."

"The Vicar is a man of taste, child. I commend his choice of quaker grey. You will look charming in cool grey and white accentuating the darkness of your hair and eyes. A mob cap on that dear little head——!" He paused abruptly, and turned away. Miranda dropped the dress material and hurried to his side.

"What is it, Daddy?"

He answered her firmly:

"A passing weakness, child. I remembered suddenly that the mob cap is a badge of servitude. Even I am not immune from the preconceived idea. I—I wear blinkers. But," he made a gesture, "I tear them from me. You are my brave daughter, adventurous as I am. All of us must serve. Let our service be rendered gladly, and so we shall help, not hinder, the work of the Great Designer."

He kissed her tenderly.

"How wonderful you are!" exclaimed Miranda.

IV

Ten days before Miranda left home, she met Ralph Somervell, but not in the studio. The hard-hearted, who

contend that motive, not impulse, underlies human action and conduct, may raise supercilious brows at the statement that this meeting happened to be the result of a happy chance. But so it was. Shall we affirm, too, that adventures impose themselves upon the adventurous. To the wanderer from the beaten track all things are possible.

Miranda determined to visit Medbery-Hawthorne and glance, from the outside, at the Vicarage. She might, so she reflected, drink a cup of tea in some cottage where cyclists are invited to rest and refresh themselves, and imbibe at the same time information concerning Mr. and Mrs. Merrytree.

Accordingly, upon a fine summer afternoon, she mounted her bicycle and fared forth upon the high road which runs from Moscombe to Sloden-Pauncefort, crossing the river at Whitechurch. After tea, she promised herself a ramble through the Forest, the beloved forest of her childhood, so much of which was yet unexplored.

She sped gaily on her way, conscious of that sense of exhilaration that always quickened pulses when she left behind the gimcrack, jerry-built houses of Moscombe. After leaving Whitechurch, she could see the Forest of Ys in front of her—an incomparable reservation of Arcadia, shelving woods of oak and beech, delicious glades, high moorland covered with heather and bracken, where she might, perchance, get a glimpse of the tall red deer. If the flies were not too meddlesome, she might lie down in the shade after tea and think over her first impressions of Medbery-Hawthorne. The name of the village pleased her. She had prepared herself to like the villagers, to make good friends with them, to approach them with an open mind.

She pushed her machine up the sharp hill that rises out of the water-meadows. Already the character of the landscape had changed. Cattle were feeding, slowly munching the lush grasses. The cottages, scattered here and there, were thatched. She reached Medbery-Hawthorne, which crowned the first hill, about four o'clock. She had passed, with her father, through the village more than once, although, as a rule, they sought the less-frequented parts of the Forest. She remembered it vaguely as small and pretty. It belonged, she also knew, to a magnate; a man of immense possessions, who preserved religiously the character of an ancient hamlet mentioned in Doomsday Book. To-day she looked at it from a more intimate point of view. She would be in it and of it within a fortnight.

"It is too dear for words," she murmured.

But absurdly small.

"Mr. Merrytree," she thought, "has a cushy job."

She descended opposite a tiny church disappointingly modern. Not an eyesore, it suggested to a lively imagination—expediency. This miniature House of God must be reckoned an afterthought of Man; a necessary addition to a model village, built, probably, by a generous landlord, who stood for Omnipotence on his own domains. Miranda guessed that the Vicarage would be of the same date as the church. And, if so, it would be reasonably near it. Apparently it wasn't. Cream-coloured cottages, heavily thatched, stood in small gardens. Farther down the road she perceived a tavern, "The Crown and Stirrup," which she knew to be the emblem of the Lord of the Cinque Ports. Below this again was a double lodge, flanking magnificent iron gates:

one of the entrances to the magnate's park. Opposite these gates stood an alluring cottage with the welcome sign: *Teas Provided.*

Miranda pushed her cycle through a garden gay with old-fashioned flowers and tapped upon a door painted a vivid green. A smiling woman opened it.

"Tea, miss? Certainly."

Leaving her bicycle, Miranda passed through the cottage and into a trellised arbour.

"Where is the Vicarage?" asked Miranda presently.

"Up the road, miss, on the right."

"Not much for a parson to do here."

"No, miss. Mr. Merrytree collects butterflies and moths. Quite a gentleman, too. Married a nice bit o' money, they say. Maybe they're friends of yours, miss?"

"Not yet," said Miranda. "Are they old people?"

"Old-like in their ways, miss."

She bustled off to wait on other customers. Miranda sipped her tea, enjoying the passing minute. A cool breeze fanned her cheeks. On the higher ground it would blow stronger and keep the flies from her. Her mind lingered upon creature comforts. She hoped that the Merrytrees provided fresh butter, not margarine. It was pleasant to know that Mr. Merrytree had independent means. But—a butterfly collector! He impaled specimens on pins, labelled them carefully, gloated over them! She beheld him going out at night to sugar trees. Her sire was slightly contemptuous of this passion for collecting; this ardour of the chase. But, in his way, he pursued theories as ardently.

When she paid her modest bill, another question was asked:

"Is there a carrier between here and Moscombe?"

An answer in the affirmative provoked more questions. Miranda made some notes, jotting down the carrier's name and address and his headquarters in Moscombe. The carrier could take her box to the Vicarage.

Leaving her bicycle at the cottage, she walked briskly up the road. After a peep at the Vicarage, she intended to strike into the Forest now close at hand, marching with the magnate's broad acres. And a peep it proved to be, because the house, approached by a genteel carriage drive, stood back from the road. She could see, however, that a stack of venerable chimneys surmounted a tiled roof, out of which dormer windows winked at her. The gravel in the drive had been freshly laid down and rolled smooth, satisfactory evidence of comparative prosperity. Miranda judged the house to be large enough. She would be given a room to herself. A room shared, possibly, with some imperfect ablutioner aroused poignant apprehensions.

She decided that she had seen enough of Medbery-Hawthorne; just enough to whet appetite for more browsing later on. The lines of her life as parlourmaid, whether they were destined to be straight or crooked, lay in a pleasant and peaceful place.

The woods of the magnate were to her left; on her right stretched moorland with an enclosure of firs in the distance. She walked upon springy turf, dotted with furze bushes. From one of these a dog-fox trotted quietly away. Stonechats scolded her from the whins.

To be alone was no new experience. Often she had felt lonely in Moscombe listening to the prattle of neighbours. It astonished her that so little sufficed them as

regards the quality rather than the quantity of their talk. But it had not yet occurred to her that her beloved father, in his zeal to form a plastic mind, had talked his less-gifted neighbours completely out of court. He was tolerant of everything except inanity. Young men, as has been said, fluttered to and away from Adam Issell's daughter. She was not aware that they bored her. The more enterprising, accustomed to the smirking suburban coquettes, attempting well-tried wiles and guiles, were abashed by her calm virginal glances. They could not understand her, and then she wondered, vaguely, why she could not understand them. "The Captain," as Mr. Issell called him, was certainly the first young fellow with whom she could talk at ease.

What would he say when he heard that she was a parlourmaid?

The preconceived idea of what any young gentleman would say upon such a subject warped her judgment of him. He would shrug his shoulders and smile derisively. He would think less well of her.

Thinking of him, he appeared suddenly.

She saw a horseman cantering towards her. Her first instinct was flight into the whins. But he must have seen her. A vanishing young woman would arouse curiosity. If discovered, her position would be untenable. He had appeared round a bend in a grassy fairway. He might canter past her. She half-hoped he would.

"You, Miss Issell?"

He had reined up his horse and lifted his hat, laughing down upon her, aglow with youth and high health; a gallant figure.

She greeted him demurely, conscious of a thrill, hoping that she was not blushing.

"But what are you doing here?"

"I biked over to Medbery-Hawthorne, left my machine at a cottage where I had tea, and wandered up here."

He dismounted.

"I am delighted to see you," he said gravely. As she remained silent, he added with slight emphasis: "In the right setting."

He strolled beside her. Miranda hesitated, but his courteous manner was reassuring. Her father, admittedly, would tell her not to be a fool. He would expect her to hold her own in any company. She replied, after a pause:

"Do I look wild?"

"I meant, of course, that I detest Moscombe. When I first saw you in Moscombe, I was dumb with surprise. How is your astounding father?"

"He is still astounding, Captain Somervell."

"And so are you."

"But why? In what sense?" Her delicate brow puckered. Her father scorned reserves and reticences. He went doggedly to the root of things. He made people explain and reveal themselves.

Her companion laughed.

"I have not the gift of tongues. You have. Surely you know that you are different from other girls."

"In what way?"

He became serious again, oddly conscious that she was challenging him. No design lurked behind her question. She wanted to know something that she supposed he could tell her. He replied lamely:

"You are Miranda Issell."

He spoke her name softly. For many days and nights she had been in his thoughts. Finally, after wrestlings, he had decided that he must thrust her out of them and discontinue his visits to the studio. Chance, coincidence, destiny—one or t'other had defeated him! He thought to himself: "It is destiny!" He heard her voice with its subtle inflexions:

"Do you mean that I am different from Moscombe girls?"

"You must know that you are."

"Am I different from the girls you know—the young ladies, I mean?"

"Young ladies!" he laughed derisively. The expression, coming from her, exasperated him. And she had emphasised the two words, speaking almost as one of his mother's maids might have spoken. Little did he suspect that the witch was deliberately experimenting with the cheap title, wondering what he would do with it. He proceeded to tear it to tatters.

"Young ladies," he repeated. "There are a few old ladies left, the lavender-scented variety, I mean. I adore them. But young ladies suggest to me shoppies."

"You—you look down on shoppies? My greatest friend is a shoppie. If I could trim hats properly, I should be a shoppie."

"I don't look down on anybody," said the young man crossly, quite unaware that he was cross. "I try to take people as I find them. I call them men and women. That's good enough for me."

"Really?"

Was she mocking him?

"Hasn't the War wiped out ridiculous class distinctions?"

"Has it?"

"Are you—a—pulling my leg, Miss Issell?"

"I shouldn't dare to take such a liberty, Captain Somervell."

She smiled at him; her eyes danced with mischief. Much as she liked him, she believed that he wore what her sire called blinkers. If the blinkers were removed, would he shy at facts half seen?

"If I size you up right, you would dare anything. That is why you are so—so attractive, and so different, as I say, from other girls of my acquaintance. I hate compliments. I mean exactly this. I want to be a pal of yours. It's nothing to me, for instance, that your father keeps a shop in Moscombe."

"I understand. The shop doesn't exactly keep him."

"I—I was afraid it didn't."

Her heart warmed to him; his sincerity seemed unmistakable. And he held out the lure of friendship, comradeship. Impulsively, turning her eyes on his, she hazarded a dangerous question:

"You bought that picture, because—because——" Her voice faltered.

He lied like a gentleman.

"I wanted that picture."

"Oh! If we are to be friends, Captain Somervell, you must be very, very truthful. Daddy's pictures are not wanted by—by people who know about pictures."

"I don't pretend to know about pictures. If you ask for the truth, you shall have it. I bought that picture——"

"The Fall of the Leaf——!"

"Exactly. Because it reminded me of you."

"Am I the fallen leaf?"

"You are a delightful study in brown and gold."

"There is no gold."

Why did she twang this discordant string? Perhaps she intended, at the moment, to prepare him for beholding her as a study in cinnamon brown, wearing a mob cap and an apron.

"Something," he said abruptly, "ought to be done for your father."

This pleased her immensely. She became eager, almost trembling with excitement.

"You have thought of something? How kind of you——!"

"I have thought of my best pal, Miles Purdie."

"Who is Miles Purdie?"

"Miles, Miss Issell, is Latin for soldier. My Miles is a soldier of fortune, an up-to-date journalist. You won't think less of him when I tell you that he began his career as a printer's devil."

"I know his name."

"Of course you do. He is a famous War Correspondent. One of the very best all round. Old Miles might help Mr. Issell."

"How?"

"He is a past-master of the art of advertisement. He can boom people. He boomed two generals—sky-high! I see no reason why he shouldn't boom your Daddy."

Miranda gasped.

"If he could——!"

"I owe a lot to old Miles," continued Somervell. "I

met him in France after Mons. He made me look at life as it is."

"Without blinkers?"

"That expresses it exactly. Just what he would say himself. Yes; I chucked away my blinkers."

"This is very interesting," said Miranda softly.

Accepting this statement as encouragement, Ralph Somervell used his best pal as a peg whereupon he might hang up, indefinitely, this charmer's interest. He became volubly biographical. Miranda listened attentively. Miles Purdie remained a shadow to her, but his biographer developed rapidly as a man of substance, a loyal friend. It was enchanting to reflect that he wished to become her friend. Ralph Somervell, as a courtier, may be described as guileless, but had he been the most accomplished Lothario in the kingdom he could have followed no straighter path to his objective. He revealed what was best in him with the engaging candour of a jolly boy. When he finished Miranda glanced at a cheap wrist-watch and then at impending clouds.

"I should like to meet Mr. Purdie," she said. "He is lucky to have a friend like you. Isn't it going to rain?"

"By Jove! It is. We need a downpour to soften the Forest. Dash it! I'm thinking of our buckhounds, not of you. You'll be drenched."

"No; I have a shower-proof coat on my bike. You will get wet, not I."

She stood still, holding out her hand.

"This chance meeting has been delightful, Miss Issell. When shall I see you again?"

He spoke shyly, with a faint flush deepening the tan on his cheeks.

The maid blushed slightly. She was quite unable to analyse her emotions, but she knew, with unfailing intuition, that friendship had been established. Had he really and truly discarded blinkers? That question ravaged her. She was on the edge of full confession. At the same time she told herself that full confession might land her in a quagmire of argument. And nothing he might say would turn her from inflexible resolution. She temporised.

"I—I don't know."

Somervell said eagerly:

"I am going away for a few days. But I come back before the end of July, when I hope we shall begin hunting. I may bring Miles Purdie with me. If I do, I shall motor him over to Moscombe."

"At the end of the month I shall not be at Moscombe."

"Where will you be, Miss Issell?"

"Do you know Mr. and Mrs. Merrytree?"

"Of course, I do. Rummy old birds. Are you going to stay with them?"

She nodded, too breathless for speech. He seemed to be forcing her hand, and the contrariety of feminine nature resented this. He continued gaily:

"I shall call on the Merrytrees. And I shall come alone."

"Oh-h-h!"

"You don't object to my calling on the Merrytrees?"

"N-n-no."

He was so enchanted with her confusion, interpreting it to suit himself, that he decided to go no farther, not even as far as the high road. He might not have admitted the fact to Miles Purdie, but, secretly, he was

rejoicing in the knowledge that Adam Issell's daughter was a friend of the Merrytrees. He beheld them in altogether a new light.

"I hope you won't be bored there."

"I hope not."

He cantered away, looking back to wave his hand. The darling was looking back too!

CHAPTER III

THE VICARAGE

I

MRS. MERRYTREE sat at her davenport, as upright as the immortal Miss Pinkerton, of the Mall, Chiswick, making up her weekly books. At the moment she was trying to recall the name of some flowering shrub —Polly something or other—that had escaped from a normally retentive memory. In her day, Mrs. Merrytree had been reckoned by a fond mamma to be clever. In such reckonings the late seventies were a law unto themselves. In the schoolroom she had actually worn that ancient instrument of torture known as a "backboard." She had been trained to enter a room and walk round it with a heavy volume poised upon her head! She could remember the happy day when her mother, wearing a portentous cap, had presented her with a prize for Deportment—a book bound in tree calf, a book to be carried in and not on a pious head, "Sunday Echoes in Weekday Hours." Born within walking distance of a cathedral close, the daughter of a solicitor who numbered a bishop, a dean and two archdeacons amongst his clients, she was obviously destined to marry a clergyman of the Church of England. She did so, in due time, bringing to him several thousand pounds, and a mind and body that never shirked the duties of life. Her husband happened to be

a man of silences. Unkind persons affirmed that Alfred Merrytree said nothing because he had nothing to say. And yet, Mrs. Merrytree quoted him majestically upon every possible occasion. By doing so, she invested him with a gloss of authority which the good man was incapable of exercising outside his church. At the lectern and in the pulpit he presented to his simple parishioners a Voice. Mrs. Merrytree spoke of that voice as an organ. Nothing could rob it of the diapason quality. He submitted "thoughts" that were culled, with the aid of a Thesaurus, from a collection of sermons by eminent divines, a collection that ranked second to his collection of Lepidoptera.

Mrs. Merrytree, in fine, was really the Vicar of Medbery-Hawthorne, acknowledged frankly as such by the diocesan missionary and the bishop.

The davenport which she used reverentially had belonged to her mamma. There is no more inconvenient article of furniture. Beside it stood a "nest" of tables upon which Mrs. Merrytree could spread her books and bills. When not in use the "nest" took up little space in the prim drawing-room.

Mrs. Merrytree laid down her quill, when Kate, the housemaid, entered the room. All her housemaids were called Kate. Cook was spoken of as Cook, parlourmaids answered to the name of Mary.

"Well, Kate, what is it?"

"The new parlourmaid has come, m'm."

"I will see her. By the way, Kate, I had better tell you that this is her first place. Make her feel at home. Give her what hints you can, like a good kind girl."

"Yes, m'm."

Kate retired. Mrs. Merrytree rose from her chair and composed her mind. She knew and trusted Mrs. Paxton. Mrs. Paxton had vouched for M. Wensdy. M. probably stood for Mary. The girl, so she had been assured, was respectable, a Churchwoman, anxious to please, and intelligent. But Mrs. Paxton had added a bewildering postscript:

"You will find her quite out of the ordinary."

What did that mean?

Miranda entered in mufti. Mrs. Merrytree clutched the back of a chair. Her knees, momentarily, became as wax.

"Are you Wensdy?"

"Yes, madam."

"Please sit down."

As Miranda did so with a grace not lost upon her mistress, Mrs. Merrytree pulled herself together. She was incapable of expressing herself as "rattled," but no other word can adequately describe her mental condition. Next day, reciting the facts to the august Lady of the Manor, she said solemnly:

"The girl walked in upon me as if she were a duchess. She smiled at me; she was inexpensively but admirably dressed; she spoke in a soft, cultivated voice; she took a chair, my dear friend, as—as you do. I admit that I quite lost my self-possession."

Having sat down, Miranda folded her gloved hands upon her lap, and looked, as before, at the carpet, which found instant favour in her sight, being a well-worn Persian. Mrs. Merrytree sank upon a sofa. She was not quite sure that an absurd mistake had not been made.

"You have come to me as a parlourmaid?"

"Yes, madam. I—I appreciate your confidence in giving me my first place. I shall try hard to deserve it."

"We—I speak for the Vicar—we couldn't call you Wensdy. Really, you know, if we called you Wensdy, some flippant parishioner might call me Mrs. Crusoe."

Miranda laughed, a discreet tinkle, seldom heard belowstairs. Mrs. Merrytree continued:

"The Vicar wishes you to be called Mary."

"That is as you please, madam."

"We hope you will be happy here."

Miranda replied with enthusiasm:

"It's a dear little place."

Mrs. Merrytree tried (and failed) to determine whether her new parlourmaid was speaking of her situation or Medbery-Hawthorne.

"You have been baptised and confirmed?"

"Yes, madam."

"I suggest, Mary, that you address me as ma'am, not madam."

"Certainly, madam. I beg pardon, I mean ma'am."

Mrs. Merrytree discoursed at length upon Mary's duties, wandering now and again down by-paths whither we cannot attempt to follow her. Mary replied in monosyllables. At the end of this memorable interview, she was conducted by her mistress to her room, where she was left alone to unpack her box and her first impressions of service. Before she joined her fellow-servants, she wrote a letter to her father.

DARLING DADDY:—I am quite all right. The first plunge is over. Now I am striking out boldly, confident that I can keep myself afloat. SHE—I have discovered already that my co-workers speak of our mistress as SHE—is really HE. You were wrong. The preconceived idea is once more rolled in the

dust. The Vicar is negligible in this house. Well, SHE is a good sort, very old-fashioned in her ways, very pernickety, but kind to her maids. Cook and Kate, the housemaid, told me in two minutes that the place was dull, but I shan't find it so. So cheer up!

Darling, it was too beastly leaving you. How horribly we shall miss each other! But I have a nice little room to myself, and in it I shall have imaginary talks with you. You can be sure that I shall not be overworked. And we don't have margarine. Cook and Kate are fat and rosy. Honestly, my good luck amazes me, and I am ever so grateful to dear Mrs. Paxton. You told me once that Patience isn't a gift, but an art, the art of hoping. I am brimming over with hope for you and hope for myself. We shall arrive at our destination some day.

Your loving daughter,

MIRANDA.

P. S.—I am to be called Mary. Isn't that satisfactory? I might have been called Polly!

II

It is significant that Miranda imposed her personality upon her fellow-servants within twenty-four hours. They accepted her, gaping, as beyond their horizon. After breakfast, Mrs. Merrytree gave the orders of the day to Cook, and was not above a friendly gossip with her. We must admit reluctantly that Miranda's mistress was of an inquisitive disposition, but her curiosity concerning others happened to be exercised indirectly. She would have torn her genteel tongue out, for instance, rather than ask her new parlourmaid questions of a personal nature, questions which positively burned upon her lips.

"What do you think of Mary, Cook?"

"Well, m'm, me an' Kate sat up last night till past twelve talkin' her over. She's a young lady. There's no two two's about it. It makes it orkard for me and Kate, but we must put up with it."

"You mean, Cook, that with you and Kate Mary gives herself airs?"

"Airs, m'm? Not she. If she was airified with us, she wouldn't be a reel lady."

Mrs. Merrytree was impressed. But her curiosity became inordinate. She recognised Cook's judgment as infallible, the more so because it confirmed her own. A girl might, presumably, pose as a young lady before her mistress, play the part prettily, but could she keep it up in the kitchen? Would she not "give herself away" in a thousand tiny unconsidered words and actions? From that moment, Mrs. Merrytree accepted Miranda as a young lady and a dainty bag of mystery. Nevertheless, she questioned Cook further:

"Why does her being a young lady make it awkward for you?"

Cook replied bluntly:

"I think you can guess why, m'm."

Mrs. Merrytree blushed, slightly angry with herself for being indiscreet. She sucked comfort from the reflection that Mary might "lift" *me-an'-Kate* into purer conversational realms, but, wisely, she didn't say so. Cook, as an old and confidential servant, added her ultimatum:

"Me-an'-Kate agree that Mary bein' a young lady ain't none of our business. She aims, I must say, to please us as well as you, m'm. No complaints!"

The Vicar blinked short-sightedly at Miranda when he first saw her, and, at breakfast, broke into speech:

"Who is this girl, Annabella?"

"I—I don't know, Alfred."

"You have the customary references, I take it?"

"I have dispensed with references. Mrs. Paxton rec-

ommended her. The servant problem is beyond me. We take what we can get."

"She is beautiful—beautiful."

"She is nothing of the kind. This is her first place. I shall have to train her. She has good manners; she is intelligent."

"Beautiful," murmured the Vicar. "She flitted past me before breakfast like a white and grey moth. I thought of Hannah Lightfoot."

"We have had no maid of that name."

The Vicar held his tongue.

Mrs. Merrytree spent most of the morning with Miranda, instructing her in her duties in and about the pantry. Incidentally, as the wife and helpmeet of one who had the cure of souls, she touched lightly upon what she termed—Religion. At the Vicarage, Mrs. Merrytree, not the Vicar, read Family Prayers.

"I trust that your religion means something to you, Mary?"

Miranda said sincerely:

"Yes, m'm."

"I am rejoiced to hear that. You have been carefully brought up, I am sure. The Vicar says that this is an age of Unfaith, and young people, especially, have wandered from the Light. I should be happy to think it was not so with you. The faith of a young girl should be strong."

Adam Issell's daughter replied promptly:

"But we must not accept too blindly the faith of others."

"What do you mean, Mary?"

Miranda quoted her sire, but Mrs. Merrytree could hardly be expected to divine this.

"The faith which we accept blindly from others may be fathered by fear and mothered by desire."

Mrs. Merrytree almost dropped a cut-glass decanter. She stood stupefied before her parlourmaid. And yet the words sank slowly in. Had she heard them from the lips of a bishop, she would have accepted them as a message to be pondered over. "Fathered by fear and mothered by desire."

"Is that your own, Mary?"

"No, m'm."

"You read it somewhere?"

"Father said it. He was speaking, of course, of dogma. Calvin believed that infants, not a span long, were crawling on the floor of Hell. That, perhaps, is a monstrous instance of perverted faith accepted blindly from others. Calvin, so father says, got this horrible idea out of Origen."

"Out of Origen?" repeated Mrs. Merrytree.

"Yes. And you know what Origen thought about women?"

"I don't."

"He regarded us as animals, mostly devils. But he modified his extreme views towards the close of his life. Father forgives him a lot because he preached the restoration of all sinners."

"The restoration of all sinners?"

"Tennyson believed that. I love him for it."

"Tennyson?"

Miranda quoted:

"That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed;
Or cast as rubbish to the void;
When God hath made the pile complete."

Mrs. Merrytree roused herself. She awoke from a sort of hypnotic trance.

"We will go over the list of silver, Mary."

Miranda stepped quickly from metaphysics to the pantry.

"If you please, m'm."

III

We can infer what we like from Mrs. Merrytree's notable abstention from protest or rebuke. She was foundering in quicksands of speculation. Having accepted Miranda as a young lady, she was petrified into silence by her cleverness. Who was her father whom she had quoted so glibly? And that early Father of the Church—Origen. She had heard of Origen, and, on leaving the pantry, she refreshed her memory with a furtive dive into the "Encyclopædia Britannica." Then, metaphorically, she sat down to fan herself, to cool off! It was almost a case for the bishop. She wanted to lean against a pillar of the Church. If she leaned against her husband he would fall, taking her with him into abysmal depths of silence. Why had this young lady come to her? Could the Finger of Providence be discerned, tracing inscrutable hieroglyphics upon the wall? After luncheon, she wrote to Mrs. Paxton:

Dear Madam:—Your protégée has arrived. She is, as you warned me, quite out of the ordinary. Can't you tell me, in strictest confidence, more about her? I do not ask this out of idle curiosity. I feel that so charming a girl is a grave responsi-

bility. The Vicar cannot express his astonishment. I am quite bewildered. I hasten to add that I have no fault to find with her. She appears to be anxious to please, and I am sure that she will be quick to learn our ways.

Yours faithfully,
ANNABELLA MERRYTREE.

By return of post came an unsatisfactory answer:

DEAR MADAM:—I would gladly answer your questions, if I were at liberty to do so. I can only repeat what I told you before. Your parlourmaid is a young woman of unblemished reputation, able and willing to do her duty.

Yours faithfully,
LUCY PAXTON.

"There is a mystery," thought Mrs. Merrytree.

But, in a couple of days, Miranda had "made good." She might be a princess in disguise; she might be a lady novelist seeking copy at first hand; she did her work capably and deftly. She could be deemed a "treasure."

"I can trust her with my bits of Chelsea," said Mrs. Merrytree.

The girl's appreciation of beauty revealed itself. She praised one print as superlative, and denounced another as worthless. In a small showcase in the drawing-room, were half a dozen miniatures.

"That one," said Mrs. Merrytree, "is a Cosway, Mary."

"Are you sure, m'm?" asked Mary.

"It was left me by an aunt, Mary, who told me that it was a Cosway; a miniature of my great uncle."

"Richard Cosway," said Miranda, "died in 1821, I think. That is the costume of 1830. It doesn't quite look like Cosway's work."

Mrs. Merrytree told her husband.

"Mary is right. It isn't a Cosway."

"Good gracious, Alfred, why couldn't you say so before?"

"My dear, it pleased you to believe that it was a Cosway."

Thus enlightened and confounded by her parlourmaid's specialised knowledge, Mrs. Merrytree endeavoured to slake her curiosity at the sealed fountain.

"Where did you learn about miniatures?"

"From Father."

"A collector, perhaps?"

"Oh, no. My father is an artist; a genius. I have heard him say that if he owned anything really precious, a wonderful picture or rare porcelain, he would give it to the nation."

"He must be a remarkable man."

"He is. Perhaps you would call him eccentric. I have never met anybody like him."

"Did—did he object to your going into service?"

"How could he? All his life he has preached the gospel of service. My Aunt Barbara made an absurd fuss, but she is cut to pattern. Anyway, I wanted to earn my own living."

"As an experience?"

"What is experience? Father calls it a set of illustrations to a series of fables."

Mrs. Merrytree was unable to grapple with this. She walked slowly away from Miranda, more mystified than ever. She decided that she couldn't, honourably, pump information out of this loving daughter. Her father, probably, was quite mad. Great wits were allied to madness. She asked the Lady of the Manor if she had ever heard of an artist called Wensdy.

"I can't help you. Once we employed a landscape gardener of the name of Mundy. He died of drink, I remember."

Mrs. Merrytree looked pained. It occurred to her that Mary's father, being an artist and a genius, and not known to rank and fashion, might have drowned disappointment in alcohol. This hypothesis deepened from possibility into probability when she remembered that Mary had offered to take the chill off the claret which the Vicar drank at dinner.

IV

The effect of Miranda upon her mistress has been sufficiently indicated. We leave that good lady, for the moment, in a pea-soup fog of perplexity, groping her way to right judgments from devastatingly insufficient data.

Me-an'-Kate, linked together as twin leaves from the same tree, rough, robust specimens, accepted Miranda with nudgings, gigglings, and whisperings. They couldn't help liking her, because, quite unaffectedly, she liked them. Constraint is soon melted by genuine sympathy. Within twenty-four hours Kate was talking to Miranda about "boys." Miranda was astounded at her seemingly inexhaustible knowledge of the opposite sex. Kate had "walked out" with a score of young fellows; she had been "engaged" to three. Cook, on the other hand, was, and intended to remain a widow. Her husband had been killed in the War. Cook wiped dry eyes when she mentioned him, as a matter of form, and hoped, dubiously, that he had gone to "the good place." Miranda inferred that he hadn't.

"I made 'im take the pledge, Mary, before I married 'im, but 'e broke it, dearie, the day after the serrymony.

Men is like that. If they want a thing, they'll just do an' say anythink to get it. My pore Tom wanted me. Reely, I carn't see 'im as 'appy anywheres, not even in Heving, if it's bone dry."

"He seems to have made you happy," said Miranda pensively.

"Dearie, 'e didn't."

"I mean, he made you happy by leaving you. You are splendidly jolly, refreshingly so. Better luck next time."

"That's what Mother said, when we 'eard that Tom was blown to bits. But if I knows meself, there'll be no next time, not 'arf."

"You have children, perhaps?"

"Kids——!" Cook laughed scornfully. "Not me. Mother 'ad eleven. She says to me: 'Be warned in time by mother's 'arm, and you shall do full well.' "

Miranda laughed, but she was slightly shocked, and dropped the subject hastily. A Rabelaisian flavour spiced Cook's diction and gave it animation, but the garlic was spared to Mary by me-an'-Kate.

Nevertheless, these two women, some years older than herself, primitive but sound at core, constrained her to new and disconcerting conclusions. They lived, like animals, for the passing moment, passively indifferent to the future. For example, me-an'-Kate acclaimed Mrs. Merrytree as a good mistress mainly because she never interfered with their hours "off." They could make their modest arrangements knowing that SHE would not upset them. SHE poked her nose into all corners; SHE might appear suddenly anywhere in the house, at any moment, pointing a minatory finger at dust or cobwebs,

but SHE allowed them time to themselves. When the work was done properly, the workers were reasonably at liberty to please themselves. Cook could slip into the village to help "Mother." Kate had time to write immensely long letters to her "boys."

Perhaps the first soul-stirring effect of domestic service upon a young and sensitive girl was the realisation of lots in life infinitely harder than her own. Cook's mother was struggling desperately against overwhelming odds and ever-increasing anxieties. She had broken down in health after bearing eleven children; her husband was crippled by rheumatism, and unable to earn an adequate wage; the younger children had to be fed and clothed. Kate had "trouble" of a more sinister complexion at her home in a distant village. Her sister was "no better than she should be." Her father was a ne'er-do-well.

"I carn't stick it over home," said Kate, "and that's that."

And yet—confounding fact!—me-an'-Kate sang hymns as they scrubbed floors and pans, slept soundly as soon as their heads touched their pillows, and laughed uproariously with or without provocation.

"This is a funny world," thought Miranda.

At meals, me-an'-Kate gossiped freely about men. Each asserted with comical vehemence, that she, thank Gawd! was independent of Man. But with every word uttered, and more, with the Rabelaisian words so carefully left unsaid, Miranda realised the dominating influence of Man over Woman. Primitive Woman was at the mercy of Man.

She beheld Ralph Somervell in a new and blinding light.

It had occurred to her that she might write to him, and apprise him of the change in her condition. The village post office was hard by. Kate slipped out to post her letters. Miranda gladly availed herself of the same privilege. Nobody knew that she wrote to Mr. Adam Issell. Possibly, the Puck in her tempted her to "test" Captain Somervell, to "read" him unexpurgated. Startling and revealing lines might appear upon his handsome face, when Adam Issell's daughter opened the door of the Vicarage to him. What would he say? Could he dissemble, if—if he really prized her friendship?

The explanatory letter filled her mind, but was not set down on paper. He might not call. In her heart of hearts she felt certain that he would.

Waiting upon the Merrytrees, she heard the Somervell family discussed. Parsons' wives are outspoken in their comments upon neighbours. Chorley lay less than three miles from Medberry-Hawthorne. Miranda felt as if she were eavesdropping, when the name so constantly in her thoughts cropped suddenly out of a silence.

"Ralph Somervell," said Mrs. Merrytree, "is at home again. I saw him yesterday in Sloden-Pauncefort."

Miranda took a firm grip of the salad bowl, as the Vicar dipped into it. The young man might have asked Mrs. Merrytree if she was entertaining a Miss Issell. She regained self-possession as her mistress continued blandly: "I did not speak to him. He was with a stranger, a red-headed, freckled man who wore spectacles."

"Miles Purdie," thought Miranda. "Will he boom Daddy? Will he?"

Mrs. Merrytree abandoned the stranger.

"The Somervells," she went on, "are quite extraordinary. You have said so, Alfred."

"Have I, my dear? I dare say. This is an excellent salad."

"Mary mixed it. You have just the right touch of tarragon, Mary."

"Thank you, m'm."

"You do think the Somervells extraordinary, don't you, Alfred?"

"In what way, Annabella?"

"I am not speaking of Ralph. But his people, civil enough to me, are so ridiculously out of date. What, I ask you, do they do for others?"

The Vicar hazarded no reply.

"They live in absurd isolation. I suppose it's weakness. Colonel Somervell has a weak head; Mrs. Somervell is supposed to have a weak heart; Ruth Somervell has a general weakness, an inherited inability to think for herself. Before the War, I pitied the Somervells. Now, they exasperate me. Pernicious mental anæmia, I call it. You have used that phrase, Alfred?"

"It's a useful phrase," admitted the Vicar.

"When you preach at Chorley, you might adopt it as your theme. I suppose Ralph will marry Alice Apperton. The girl is quite cracked about fox-hunting. But they'll make a pretty couple."

"Are they engaged, my dear?"

"They ought to be. She is always dancing with him. Alice walks puppies."

"Is that an allusion to Ralph?"

"Not at all. Ralph has distinguished himself. He may go far."

"Yes. If my memory serves me, his regiment is in the Punjab."

"True; and the Colonel wants him to exchange into the home battalion. However, if Ralph marries the right sort of girl, he may do something worth while."

"You are not confounding cause and effect?"

"I beg your pardon, Alfred?"

"If he marries the right sort, he will have done something worth while. That is how I felt when I married you, my dear."

At rare intervals the Vicar paid such delicate compliments to the wife who made him so extremely comfortable. Mrs. Merrytree smiled. The Somervells were left in their absurd isolation.

V

Miranda had never heard of Alice Apperton, but a lively imagination can make bricks out of straws. She beheld Alice as the real right thing in wives, a dashing horsewoman, and a ministering angel to puppies. Alice was the daughter of the Squire of Sloden-Pauncefort. Kate knew all about him.

It was impossible to discuss the Somervells with mean'-Kate. But Miranda hoped to glean something from Kate about Alice Apperton. Kate was a *bonne gazette du pays,* and rarely ill-natured about the quality, if they were quality.

"Oh, yes, Miss Alice used to pop in and out of our cottage before—before what wasn't wanted was picked out of the gooseberrry patch. A nice young lady, free with her sixpences. Did her 'bit' too, as a V.A.D. Rides a fair treat. But it's 'orses an' 'ounds with all they Ap-

pertons. 'Tis a pity so many fine young fellers was killed in the War. Squire's daughters are marriage ripe and ready to fall from the tree, but the pickers are dead."

No mention of Captain Somervell.

"There can't be anything in that," thought Miranda.

Inwardly she blushed. Why should she care?

Did she care?

Regarding him as a friend, a comrade, his marriage with the right sort ought to be a source of pleasure and gratification. Somehow it wasn't. Why had she been glad, glad, when Kate—sure snapper-up of all gossip—left the Captain with his family in isolation?

Meanwhile, she was eating her dinner with appetite. Manual work seemed to agree with her. Her glass—not a flattering mirror—reflected pinker cheeks and redder lips. In her afternoon livery she looked pretty. Me-an'-Kate said so.

"Pretty as a magpie," observed Kate.

Her old-fashioned mob cap became her admirably.

She was fully sensible that her general appearance provoked stares from visitors.

"You don't look like a P-maid," remarked the critical Kate, "an' you never will, dear, not if it were never so."

"She'd ought to play it on the stage," said Cook.

This random shaft reached its mark. Miranda had to admit to herself that she was playing a part, and, fortunately, "getting over." She failed to see her father's daughter going on playing parlourmaid. She felt perched upon an emergency, likely to tumble off it, if she lost her balance. All the same Cook's roly-poly pudding tasted good.

Kate was in robustious spirits, anticipating the joys of an afternoon off. At 5.30 she would meet one of the magnate's many gardeners. Together the happy pair would cycle to Whitechurch to see the "movies." On Sunday, Kate walked out with another admirer, who was "serious."

"'Arold is a good boy," said Kate complacently.

"Do you mean that the other isn't?" asked Miranda.

"I 'ave to keep 'im in order, an' I do."

"Nothink like it," sighed Cook. "Give 'em an inch, an' you may find yerself in 'ell, as Mother allers told us girls. You don't give George money, Kit, do yer?"

"George," said Kate solemnly, "pays 'andsome for my company. He's freer with his cash than 'Arold. But you carn't 'ave it both ways. 'Arold 'as money in the bank."

"A-h-h! You make 'Arold show you 'is book afore you comes to any sort of understandin'. Trust no men an' precious few women."

"I shall go an' give my teeth a good rub with emery paper," said Kate. "George likes girls as takes proper care o' theirselves."

She went out of the kitchen.

Miranda helped Cook to clear the table.

"Do you think," she asked, "that Kate will marry Harold because he has money in the bank?"

"She might do worse, dear. But reelly, Kate knows too much to get married. She likes 'er bit o' fun. Matrimony ain't what it's cracked up to be, leastways not for pore folk. Well, you'll be off on Thursday."

"Yes."

"Anybody waitin' for you?"

"Somebody at home."

"Mother?"

"My dear father."

Cook's honest face expressed disappointment. Miranda added softly: "My mother died when I was two years old."

"A very sad mishap," said Cook.

Presently, Miranda, having dealt faithfully with her work in the pantry, sat down to darn the Vicar's socks. Sewing, and especially darning, lends itself to introspection, but Miranda felt rather sleepy. Cook, too, was taking a snooze in an arm-chair.

"They take life as they find it," thought Miranda. "How wise. They drift with the current." A pleasant languor stole upon her. This, she reflected, was creature comfort: repose after a somewhat heavy meal.

"Am I gorged?"

She glanced at the kitchen clock. She could hear it ticking away the drowsy seconds. Very soon she would have to prepare tea. Mrs. Merrytree was particular about teas. Her visitors, for the most part, called at tea-time, sure of a welcome and hot scones.

The front-door bell tinkled.

Miranda laid aside her darning, smoothed her apron; made certain that the mob cap was on straight, and then hastened down the passage.

She opened the front door.

Facing her, glaring at her, pop-eyed with amazement, stood Ralph Somervell.

CHAPTER IV

ABSURD ISOLATION

I

MIRANDA laid a slim finger upon her lips when Somervell recovered himself sufficiently to gasp out:

"You? Parlourmaid?"

He spoke, she noticed, with extreme irritation. And no wonder! At the sight of his distress her heart melted. She trembled a little. He looked as if he wanted to shake her. She said in a whisper:

"I am Mary Wensdy—Mary Wensdy."

"And I am Thomas Fool."

"I will explain at another time." Swiftly she became Mary. In her soft voice, with the faintest inflexion of derision, she went on:

"Mrs. Merrytree is in the garden, sir."

She moved across the small hall to the drawing-room door and opened it. Somervell strode past her, biting his lips. She followed, closing the door. French windows were at the farther end of the room. Through these Mrs. Merrytree might be seen tending her roses. Somervell dared not speak above a whisper, although that whisper sounded to Miranda like the growling of a wounded lion.

"When is your afternoon off?"

"Day after to-morrow."

"You bike to Moscombe?" She nodded. "When do you leave here?"

"Half-past two."

He nodded, still scowling. Miranda walked sedately into the garden.

"Damn!" exclaimed the choleric captain.

II

Mrs. Merrytree was delighted to see him. It was grossly unfair that the Somervells should possess such a son. But, in a sense, he justified their existence.

"How nice of you to call on an old woman!"

He sat down and talked perfunctorily.

"He *is* a Somervell," thought Mrs. Merrytree. Then, in a sprightly attempt to steer the talk from the weather, she asked him:

"What do you think of my new parlourmaid?"

What did he think of her? There are moments when we tell the truth with a grateful sense that nothing else is possible.

"She astounded me."

"Ah. You are not the first to be astounded. The Vicar says she reminds him of a grey-white moth flitting past him. In the morning she wears grey. She is wonderful; a mystery."

He answered with odd vehemence:

"You are perfectly right—a mystery. I—I took her to be a guest of yours masquerading as a parlourmaid."

"Quite—quite." She was pleased with his perspicacity.

"Who is she, Mrs. Merrytree?"

"My dear boy, I don't know. Mrs. Paxton of Mos-

combe sent her to me. This is her first place, but she is not untrained. Of course, she is a lady. What has driven her into service? I need hardly add that I respect her reserves. We call her Mary. She has a ridiculous name—Wensdy. Her father, so she assures me—is a genius, unrecognised as such. He appears to have filled her mind with ideas and expressions far beyond me. But she does her work; she does her work."

As if in proof of this, Miranda appeared carrying the tea-tray. Her cheeks were flushed. To Somervell she seemed ten times as alluring. Possibly the social distance between man and maid lent enchantment to his new view of her. Deftly she did her duty and left the room.

"We are putting roses into her cheeks," observed Mrs. Merrytree.

Somervell mumbled something. He seemed to have lost interest in the new parlourmaid. He drank his tea and attacked a Dundee cake, adding irritably:

"The world is topsy-turvy. Why can't we get lump sugar at home?"

"Change your grocer if he won't supply it."

"We never change anybody or anything," he grumbled. He had known Mrs. Merrytree for twenty years. She was a nice, kind, old thing; an understanding person. Sorely was he tempted to confide in her. Obviously the witch had captivated her. But the vivid remembrance of Miranda, finger on lip, restrained impulse. She had imposed secrecy.

"When do you go to India, Ralph?"

"Nothing is certain about anything."

She chided him maternally:

"You are not in the best of spirits to-day."

He replied eagerly:

"I am rather upset."

"But—why?"

"Well, you see there are moments when one is fairly up against it, against what shall I call it?—stone walls." He looked glumly at her.

"Stone walls?" she repeated. "Such a horseman as you are leaps stone walls."

"I don't leap any fence unless I know what's on t'other side. A friend of mine went at a wall round a deer park. He jumped it. But he landed on a deer and took an awful toss. He told me about it. He was very sorry for himself, but I felt sorry for the deer."

"That's very nice of you, Ralph."

"I don't want to land on a deer."

Mrs. Merrytree laughed. She perceived that a gallant son of Mars was unhappy, uneasy, and she supposed, naturally enough, that he had come to an old friend for comfort and, perhaps, advice. She said archly:

"I think I can read you."

"Can you?" He exhibited slight alarm.

"Do your people want you to settle down?"

"Yes; they do."

"You—you might jump a stone wall—there is a stone wall round Apperton Old Manor—and land upon a very pretty dear."

"Who told you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It's in the air."

"I shan't jump that wall, Mrs. Merrytree. You are very sharp. But I was thinking of another wall—the wall

of convention. My people are so confoundedly conventional." He chuckled for the first time. His voice became confidential. "Strictly between you and me——"

"Yes, Ralph?"

"I've brought a corrective from town—my best pal, Miles Purdie."

"Red-headed? Freckled?"

"You know him?"

"I saw him yesterday with you in Sloden-Pauncefort."

Heedless of grammar as the Cardinal of Rheims, he exclaimed:

"That's him. He wears specs, but he sees more through his specs than all the Somervells see without 'em. I'm counting on old Miles to clear their vision a bit. He says what I think."

"And what do you think?"

Somervell squared his shoulders. He was about to "try out" Mrs. Merrytree, whom he knew to be the daughter of a solicitor. But she had lived for twenty years upon the borders of the Forest of Ys.

"I think class distinctions are tommy-rot."

"But they aren't."

He frowned, evidently disappointed.

Mrs. Merrytree murmured persuasively:

"If you would tell me exactly what you mean——!"

"Why should my people expect me to marry some girl exactly like themselves? What is wanted is an infusion of fresh blood, fresh ideas, a brighter intelligence. Shall I find that at Apperton Old Manor?"

"To be quite candid—no."

"I haven't much to offer any girl."

"You are modest."

He continued doggedly:

"Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I cottoned to a perfect darling that was not quite of my class."

"Oh dear! Have you?"

He replied stiffly:

"I—a—speak—a——"

"Impersonally?"

"Yes—impersonally. If, I say, I cottoned to a good, clever, sweet girl whose father might be a tradesman, why should my people kick up a rumpus?"

"The daughter of a tradesman?"

"Some tradesmen are splendid fellows. Trade is the backbone of England. The father of Miles Purdie was a petty tradesman."

"I have not met Mr. Purdie. As you have spoken impersonally, merely for the sake of argument," he nodded quickly, "I can speak personally to you."

"Please."

"I don't think that you, being you, and still dependent upon your father, could marry a girl who was not acceptable to your people. You would imperil her happiness quite as much as your own."

He looked more unhappy than ever, and, awkwardly for him, changed the conversation. Soon afterwards he took his leave. He may have hoped that the new parlourmaid would speed him on his way. Mrs. Merrytree accompanied him to the front door.

"You gave me a jolly good tea," he said at parting.

"Come again, Ralph."

"I will."

III

He walked through the Forest to Chorley House. Shortly after leaving the Vicarage, he passed an immense oak, an immemorial giant, a Nestor of a tree, battered, mutilated, partly dead, but likely to endure for another hundred years. The unhappy Ralph stared at it and smote it hard with the stick he carried. With that stick he had already decapitated some ferns and bracken.

The stick broke in his hand!

Yes; that might happen to him, if he banged his head against hoary convention. We hasten to affirm that this young fellow was, as a rule, sweet-tempered. In games and sports, wherein he excelled, his friends, he had many friends, commended him as a good loser and a modest winner. But the sight of Miranda in "livery" had shattered his *moral*. By *moral* we mean courage, hope and confidence. His old friend, Mrs. Merrytree, had not given "First aid." What she had said inflamed his wounds. He felt "blistered."

"You will imperil her happiness quite as much as your own."

With what conviction she had delivered this message!

By this time his anger against Miranda was tempered by the reflection that her hand had been forced. No girl, he thought, so refined, so obviously intended by Providence for the sweeter issues of life, would expose herself to the ignominies of domestic service save under compulsion. He had not met Miss Issell, but, incontinently, he took for granted that she was the agent provocateur.

However, as he swung nearer to Chorley House, con-

fidence, not in himself, not in Miranda, but in the indomitable Miles Purdie warmed the very cockles of his chilled heart. Miles, stout soldier of Fortune, stout friend of Misfortune, would fight on his side.

But, depressing thought! what could he tell Miles, always so avid for details, so inordinately hungry for facts? He could hear that sharp voice of his:

"Look here, my dear man, does this girl love you? Where does *she* stand?"

How could he answer that?

And then Miles, no respecter of persons, would pursue relentlessly the truth. He had been lured to Chorley House under false pretences. The suggestion that he should "boom" Adam Issell would be side-tracked. Miles would say brutally: "You asked me down here to advance your interests not his. You want the girl. You think she would be more acceptable to your people, if her father were successful, if you could present the daughter of an artist not a petty tradesman. Why the devil didn't you say so honestly?"

Miles was an expert with the bludgeon.

Before he reached his father's white gate, sorely in need of a coat of paint, Ralph had adopted a plan of campaign. He had spoken with enthusiasm of Adam Issell, and he had aroused enthusiasm in Miles. He had intended to take Miles over to Moscombe, where, quite incidentally, he would meet Miranda. It was certain that a man of his ardent temperament would be captivated by this original pair, and help them if he could. What Miles would do with his flaming imagination, how he would boom the designer of wall-papers, might be left in abeyance.

Now, with Miranda out of the way, out of the sight of the sharpest bespectacled eyes in the world, it was possible to concentrate fire upon old Adam. The mere presence of Miranda might have aroused suspicion.

After all, things were turning out for the best. On Thursday he would meet Miranda. On the morrow, Wednesday, he would motor Miles over to Moscombe.

He realised that he might enjoy his dinner.

He found his friend writing busily in the smoking-room. Miles had earned a holiday, and was prepared to enjoy it, but a journalist, as the name implies, must accomplish his daily task. Seeing Ralph, he swept up his papers, and pushed back his chair.

"Do I interrupt you, Miles?"

Purdie jumped up, yawned, stretched himself, and laughed.

"Always polite! I say, Ralph, this room of the Colonel's is a temple of snooze. Country gentlemen snooze a lot, don't they? And I know why——!"

He indicated the many prints upon the walls. The Colonel was a collector and an inheritor of sporting prints. The real right sort doing the right thing well were ubiquitous. Over the mantelpiece, littered with pipes, old cards of hunting appointments, hound lists, a reel or two, a much-dinted hunting-horn, and three slots of deer, hung "The Sportsman's Dream."

The British sportsman was portrayed in his multifarious activities.

"I looked at that," said Miles, "and I fell asleep."

"It's a jolly good print, old bean."

"It's more than that. It's an important chapter in English History. I have wondered sometimes why men

like your father spend the evening of life pottering about a garden or sitting in a room such as this. They are resting after the labours of Hercules. Well, where have you been, my lad? What have you done? Seen anybody you liked better than yourself, eh?"

"I have called upon an old lady, and made too big a tea."

Miles surveyed him admiringly.

"You soldiers do your duty. Any expectations from the old lady?"

"None. By the way, I want you to see Adam Issell to-morrow."

"Right."

"I warn you, he'll out-talk you."

"Good."

"Also, I hope, you will write a stinger, advocating the destruction of Moscombe."

"What tosh! I have not seen Moscombe."

"My congratulations."

"But I can envisage Moscombe as a sort of suburb of Cronmouth, and as an epitome of how not to do it. Moscombe is an object lesson. Show a child a drunken man in his most disgusting stage and you are teaching not preaching—temperance. Moscombe is a sign of the times. For my sins I have just been appointed a director of a School of Journalism. Do I tell the youngsters how to write? Not much. I make them write—anything, everything. But they have to read their stuff aloud to each other. The punishment fits the crime. I don't brandish a red pencil; they do."

The dressing-gong sounded.

IV

Ralph had wondered how Miles would behave in the presence of his people. Misgiving assailed him. The Colonel, in his own house, and particularly at his own table, was a courteous host. But he might bristle up if dangerous topics of talk were flaunted indiscreetly. His mother, on such rare occasions, looked down her nose. Ruth would blush and crumble her bread. The offending guest would never be asked to Chorley House again.

"I shall give your entertaining friend a bottle of '68," said Colonel Somervell. "I was surprised to find that he is knowledgable about wine."

"Why shouldn't he be?"

"From what you have told me, and from what he frankly admits himself, I expected a palate for beer. His remarks, at dinner, about burgundy and the finer growths of claret astonished me."

"Do you think, Father, that a palate for decent wine is only given to the nobility and landed gentry?"

The Colonel answered stiffly:

"I think, Ralph, that Hodge cannot afford decent wine."

"Miles Purdie is not Hodge."

"And you are not a fool; you understand me perfectly."

"All right, Father. But I don't think you realise that Miles is a remarkable man. It's an honour to entertain him. I was tremendously bucked when I persuaded him to come down here. Miles could be lionised by duchesses, but he loathes smart society."

The Colonel nodded.

"I like your friend, Ralph. Your dear mother and I can form our own opinions. Come down to the cellar with me. I need support there. Most of the bins empty. No champagne left!"

He sighed deeply, and took his son's arm, pressing it affectionately, sensible that he had been sharp with him, unduly irritable, a result of the War. Ralph was a good boy, a well-bred 'un. He might have been killed in the War. And India was a long way off.

Father and son went down to the cellar.

Having dressed for dinner, Ralph descended to the drawing-room, where he found his friend, critical as usual. The long low room had tone, not much else. Time had mellowed wall-paper, curtains, carpet and brocades.

"It glows softly," said Miles. "And one wonders whether the people who live in a room like this insensibly become part of it. I take it that everything here is over eighty years old?"

"Everything, except the lamp-shades. For the past fifteen years, Miles, father has talked daily of putting in electric light. He hasn't done it; he never will."

Ruth Somervell flitted in.

"Am I late, Ralph?"

"We are early. Mr. Purdie admires this room."

"It's so shabby, Mr. Purdie. But we tremble at the thought of doing it up."

"If you do it up, you do it in."

Colonel and Mrs. Somervell entered together. Looking at them, a child would have thought of Darby and Joan. The Colonel had married for love the daughter of a neighbour. They had settled down. It was diffi-

cult to believe that anything could unsettle them. Purdie, before he met them, had suspected that he might find at Chorley House a slight taint of snobbery. Exclusiveness, carried beyond reasonable limits, exasperated him. But one glance at the Colonel and his lady reassured him. They were quality. Mrs. Somervell's prettiness of mind matched the prettiness of her face. To disturb her peace would be a sort of sacrilege. She was so frail, so sublimated. Purdie, being robustly strong, was tender with weakness.

An aged butler appeared silently, wraith of the past.

"Dinner is served."

Grumble and grouse as he might, and did, against rising prices and an improvident Government, Colonel Somervell kept a good table. He waxed irritable with men who disdained creature comforts. Dyspeptic contemporaries were invited to tea, not to dinner. He decanted his best port and made his own salad. After mumbling grace he would pick up a slim book and read aloud what he had just thanked his Maker for providing.

He interested Miles Purdie enormously.

"Here," thought Miles, "we have an old boy absolutely pleased with himself. He's afraid of nothing except change."

Upon the walls hung portraits of horses and hounds. The furniture was massively ugly, made for the room by some honest craftsman in the reign of William IV. But surely the Somervells harked back farther than that! A chance observation of the Colonel's confirmed this.

"My grandfather built this house, Mr. Purdie. He

was a younger son, but he married an heiress. The head of my family lives, as you know, in Devon."

"Yes," said Purdie mendaciously.

"He is much impoverished, as we all are. I don't envy him. He lost his two sons in the War; gallant fellows. My cousin has lived to see the emptiness of an ancient house. It will be a ruin when Ralph comes into it."

Purdie pricked up his ears. He was not aware that Ralph was "coming into" anything. His friend had not even hinted at family honours. Possibly this accounted for the Colonel's wish that his son should remain in England. He heard Ralph saying testily:

"You may come into it, Father. You are as likely to live to be a hundred as any man I know."

The Colonel smiled; he was not displeased.

"I take care of myself, Mr. Purdie."

"You do," thought Miles. "You take care of yourself and everything belonging to you. Up to your neck in cotton wool, you are."

He ventured to praise the salmon.

"A Whitechurch fish, Mr. Purdie. You will have presently a slice of my own mutton."

"I look forward to that," said Miles heartily.

"Tell me what a man eats and drinks, *and drinks,* and I'll tell you what he is. I have never missed an opportunity of drinking the best wine that came my way. Even now, although my cellar is nearly empty, I can hearten myself up by reading my cellar book. When the ladies leave us to-night, we shall enjoy a bottle of '68 port. I ask that the first glass be drunk in silence."

"You will uncork the last bottle, sir, in tears."

Ralph laughed. Old Miles was making himself "solid." And his feats as a trencherman would fill the governor with envy. Recalling his after-breakfast talk with his father, he said lightly:

"Purdie knows a lot about wines; he collects 'em."

"Do you?" asked the Colonel, beaming at his guest.

"Drinking the right wine at the right time is an art. Yes; I have a small collection. If you come to London, sir, I should like to offer you a magnum of '74 Latour."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the Colonel. Then, courteously, but regretfully, he explained that he never went to London. He remained at home. He feared congested trains, congested tubes, congested hotels.

"I refuse, Mr. Purdie, to push my way through jostling crowds."

Purdie, the pusher and striver, remained silent—a notable abstention. He turned to his hostess and engaged her in conversation. Very soon she was laughing at his anecdotes, rejuvenated by the vitality of the raconteur. Evidently he wanted to please. Ralph thought: "They'll all eat out of his hand presently." But could he keep it up? He had listened to Purdie many a time dealing with reactionaries. For the moment he was purring. Everybody purred. Old Miles must have his tongue in his cheek. Of course his good manners bubbled out of a kind heart. Behind these reflections lay the great thing: the hope that Purdie would establish a dominating influence over a father not easily warped from his beliefs and judgments.

The young man was incapable of explaining why he trusted so confidently in his friend. But wiser than he regarded the famous war correspondent as a worker of

miracles. Alone with a Board of Directors against him, Purdie had changed the policy of a mighty newspaper. And to-day he owned an interest in it.

Mrs. Somervell and Ruth left the dining-room. The butler placed before the Colonel the decanter of '68 port.

V

The three men sipped the aged wine.

"A port of great character," said the Colonel.

"Magnificent," added Purdie; "in perfect condition, breed, *and* vinosity."

"Topping," said Ralph.

The Colonel was now at his best. His son was aware of it. He had waited, indeed, for this moment. As his sire broke a crisp water-biscuit, he said carelessly:

"To-morrow, Father, I am taking Purdie to Moscombe."

"Moscombe—Moscombe!" The Colonel was petrified with amazement. "Whatever for?"

"We might bathe."

"You get sand, not shingle, at Puddiford—much nearer. Moscombe! Don't insult our guest by taking him to such a damnable spot, I mean *blot*, upon the universe."

Ralph had not mentioned Adam Issell to his father. The time had come to do so. The thin edge of the wedge must be delicately inserted.

"I want Purdie to meet an extraordinary fellow, who—who designs papers and—a—chintzes."

"Papers and chintzes. I suppose somebody does design that sort of thing."

"Yes; Adam Issell does."

"Issell—Issell. That sounds like a Hun name."

"Adam Issell is English. I have every reason to believe that he is a genius."

"A genius in Moscombe? Tchah!"

Ralph was disconcerted by his father's manner and tone. He retorted impulsively:

"Christ came out of Nazareth."

Colonel Somervell held up a thin hand.

"Please! Tell us more about your genius."

"He is unrecognised as a genius simply because he lives in Moscombe."

"*That* I can understand. How did you happen to run across this genius?"

The Colonel's tone had become genial again. He passed the decanter.

"I saw a paper of Issell's designing in a window. It was impossible to believe that such a beautiful paper could be hung in Moscombe. I went in. I discovered Issell. He took me into his studio; he showed me other papers; he talked. I wish, Father, you could hear him talk. He had been wrecked in Moscombe."

"Wrecked in Moscombe? Cast up by the sea, do you mean?"

"Not exactly. He had come to grief in Moscombe. I gather that he left London about twenty years ago; London, where he was doing well—he won a gold medal for designing a chintz—and he went to Moscombe with his wife for a holiday."

The Colonel was mildly interested. He shook his head as he poured out a second glass of the '68.

"It's hardly credible, Ralph, that any genius should go to Moscombe for a holiday."

"He may have been merely passing through. His wife, whom he adored, fell ill and died there."

"I am not surprised," murmured the Colonel.

"He could not tear himself away."

"It's a tragedy, a tragedy. Couldn't tear himself away . . . !"

The Colonel had been touched in a soft spot. He had little imagination, but what he had served to suggest his dear wife being taken ill at Moscombe and dying there.

"We must admit," said Ralph tentatively, "that geniuses are not like ordinary men."

"I quite agree."

"Adam Issell is a philosopher. His theory is that all human values are founded on illusion. I shall try to repeat his words, not mine. He says that we see only what we have been taught to see; in other words, what we expect to see. He calls that the preconceived idea."

"There's something in it," exclaimed Purdie.

The Colonel looked puzzled.

"We see," he repeated, "what we expect to see."

"Take a picture, Father. If you are told beforehand that it is a Reynolds, you expect to see a Reynolds."

"I suppose I do."

"You know you do."

The Colonel winced. His artful son was alluding discreetly to a devastating experience which had happened when Ralph wore an Eton jacket at Harrow. The Colonel inherited from an aunt a kitcat which "the family" believed to be a Reynolds. The Colonel hung it in the place of honour in the drawing-room. The Forest of Ys, collectively, accepted it as a Reynolds. The Colonel himself would point out its beauties. "What a

tone! What delicacy of colouring! The master hand, eh?" Upon a never-to-be-forgotten day a competent judge of pictures had stood before it, pursing a dubious mouth, shaking a venerable head. *It was not a Reynolds.* The Colonel cursed the iconoclast behind his back and sent the portrait to London, to a famous dealer. The professional confirmed the verdict of the distinguished amateur. The kitcat returned to Chorley House to be hung in a spare bedroom!

"Get on with it," muttered the Colonel. Ralph knew that his sire was beseeching him to get "off" it, and did so. He had no wish to give his father away before Purdie.

"What applies to pictures applies to other things and people. We accept our standards of right and wrong, our code of honour, cut and dried."

"I don't," said the Colonel, flatly.

"Father!"

The young fellow gazed appealingly at Purdie, who was much amused, and, by this time, tired of holding his tongue.

"I think, sir," he said politely, "that you do. We all do."

"I carry an open mind," affirmed the Colonel, who believed that he did; "and I have no sort of objection to discussions like this, provided always that—a—personalities are excluded."

"A counsel of perfection, sir. Really the essence, the very marrow of the matter, is to be found in our own personalities. A discussion of this sort has no value unless it *is* personal. Ralph has hit me rather hard,

although even my enemies would concede that I am not exactly a man who accepts cut-and-dried standards."

"Purdie hunts humbug to its hole and then digs it out."

"Humbug?" ejaculated the Colonel.

"I do hunt humbug, sir. The word is offensive, but it serves. Civilisation imposes humbug on us. Most of us can detect it in others, but the big thing is to detect it in ourselves. I have been singularly fortunate, inasmuch as I started my career as a printer's devil."

"So my son told me."

"At this moment," continued Purdie, warming to his theme, "two men, candidates for the great position of President of the United States, started life as printers' devils."

The Colonel, who read his *Morning Post* religiously, had reckoned the fact to be a serious disability, but he didn't say so to Purdie, which indicates, possibly, that the journalist had been accepted by him, tacitly, as one with authority. Colonel Somervell respected Authority. Purdie went on:

"These two men start with an immense advantage over George Washington, let us say."

"I can't say that," interrupted the Colonel.

"In this sense, sir. They have a wider sympathy, a nicer understanding of the under-dog. Do you ignore the under-dog?"

The Colonel fidgeted. He was honest. He could recognise honesty and sincerity in others. He had thrown scraps of meat and bones to the under-dog. Perhaps, before the War, he had ignored the snapping and growling of the beast. He replied sharply:

"In these days, the under-dog cannot be ignored."

"Let us take that as a post-war fact. I return to myself. I have been under-dog, and, to-day, I am top-dog. I have been through the mill."

The Colonel inclined his head to the top-dog.

"Very creditable," he murmured; "*ve—ry* creditable."

"I wish I could take the credit to myself, sir, I was uncommonly lucky in my parents. My mother was a dairymaid. I get my grip of the world's udder from her, and a digestion that is fundamentally responsible for my sense of humour. A dyspeptic rarely sees the funny side. My mother kept a boarding-house not far from Fleet Street. My father was a typesetter. I was weaned on printer's ink. He had been a bit of a pug."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A pugilist; a bruiser. My fighting instincts come from him."

"This is very interesting, Mr. Purdie."

"Thanks. I have called your attention to my breeding, because it bears vitally upon our theme."

"Our theme? Upon my word, I have forgotten what our theme is."

"The preconceived idea."

"Quite."

"Under-dogs have preconceived ideas."

The Colonel banged the table.

"They do, sir. That is the truest word that has been spoken to-night."

"And top-dogs, too. I am immensely struck by this phrase of Issell's, quoted by Ralph: 'All human values are founded on illusion.' I am forced to reconsider my values."

"I distrust phrases, Mr. Purdie."

"You say that to a newspaper man."

He laughed joyously, distrusting all phrases himself. As he laughed, throwing back his ugly, square, red head, protruding his masterful chin, displaying his magnificent teeth, which worried so persistently all forms of humbug, the Colonel laughed with him. Dash it! the fellow was irresistible. What a thruster! What a bruiser! giving and taking blows with a jolly grin. Then and there the Colonel dropped the formal "Mister."

"I forgot that, Purdie."

"It's all right, Colonel."

"Fill your glass. We must tip up this decanter before we join the ladies and before we light our cigars."

"I should think so. I could crucify, upside down, the sacrilegious blighter who destroys the bouquet of such bottled sunshine as this with nicotine."

The Colonel was delighted. But it seemed to Ralph that the theme, so cunningly introduced, was being imperilled.

"What are your values, Miles?"

Purdie was becoming slightly exuberant. He was always exuberant in congenial company. And he was ten years older than Ralph. He eyed him paternally.

"He asks questions." His eyes twinkled behind the spectacles.

"Don't answer them, Purdie. I have never encouraged the boy to ask questions."

"What are your values?" persisted Ralph.

Thus challenged, Purdie picked up the glove. He spoke seriously. He spoke, too, hesitatingly, as if unwilling to impose his values upon others.

"Out of the welter of personal experiences, one cherishes certain convictions, certain intimate beliefs which are not preconceived. For one thing, I put, perhaps, an inordinate value on work. I am happiest when I'm at work. I can't account for it. I simply *know* it. I have met in the Latin countries men who were just as happy doing nothing; doing absolutely nothing. I am only speaking of my values. I happen to be a glutton for work. I value health. Who doesn't? It's a preconceived idea that good health is a gift of God. It isn't in my sense. I inherited the gift, qua gift, and squandered it. I fought hard to earn it, on my own. Health, like liberty, must be earned to be enjoyed. I can't tell you whether I am happy because I am healthy, or vice versa. It doesn't matter. I value power. That value may be an illusion. Perhaps it is. I value friendship."

He paused, half-frowning, recalling, possibly friends who had "let him down."

Ralph exclaimed impulsively:

"I'm hanged if you've not left out the biggest thing of all—love."

"Love!" he laughed harshly. "I have no comments to offer on love."

The Colonel raised his grizzled brows.

"If you have finished your wine, shall we drink coffee with the ladies on the lawn?"

"With pleasure."

CHAPTER V

AT MOSCOMBE

I

WEDNESDAY morning dawned grey, giving promise of sunshine later on. The Colonel was sorry that he couldn't accompany his guest to Moscombe. Neither Purdie nor he knew of the existence of Miranda, but the Sage, the Apostle of the Preconceived Idea, beguiled their fancy. The Colonel, however, was an ornament of the bench of magistrates. Duty summoned him not too sternly to Puddenhurst, that happy village in the heart of the Forest of Ys, where he would meet several old friends and exchange platitudes with them, joining harmoniously in their benedicities and misereres, particularly the latter.

Ralph drove his father's four-seater.

As soon as they were alone and fairly started Purdie said to Ralph:

"I want you to lunch with me. Perhaps Issell will join us. But, after what you have said about him, I should prefer to tackle him alone. You can have a swim."

"I will," said Ralph. "You are quite right. Form your own first impressions."

"If his wall-papers are what you crack 'em up to be, I shall buy one. I warn you I'm prepared for disappointment."

Presently they reached the river. Purdie was delighted with Whitechurch.

"We now plunge," said Ralph, "into the abomination of desolation. Look at those advertisements. Why are these miserable money-grubbers allowed to spoil green fields?"

"Because, as a nation, we are lacking in taste. But the horizon is clearing. I notice immense changes for the better. The women have an awakened appreciation for well-hung skirts. They do their hair more becomingly. Significant straws. Is there a decent hotel in Moscombe?"

"I don't know. Probably not."

Presently they climbed into the High Street, and passed a fishmonger's shop.

"Lobsters!" exclaimed Purdie. "Lovely lobsters!"

The car was left in a garage.

The two friends sauntered towards Issell's shop.

"It's not wise," said Purdie, "to order luncheon after such a breakfast as we have had, but I must do my best. That chap looks promising."

He indicated a stout individual, of middle age, rosy-gilled, smooth of skin, staring, disconsolately, into a shop where Argentine beef and New Zealand mutton advertised themselves.

"Come on! We'll tackle Boniface."

Purdie's methods were familar to Ralph. He had seen him in Flanders, on the search for "provaunt."

"I beg your pardon," said Purdie to Boniface.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen? 'Appy to oblige, I'm shaw."

"We are strangers here. Can you recommend us to

some hotel or inn where the proprietor, like yourself, is happy to oblige. A proprietor who welcomes his visitors, a proprietor who gives them what they want. In short, a man of intelligence who doesn't force cold meats into cold stomachs?"

Boniface nodded solemnly.

"Gentlemen," he replied, "you will find what you want at The Stag. I am the proprietor of The Stag. I hendeavour to please my customers. Lunch now? What would you fancy for lunch?"

"Lobsters," said Purdie. "We passed some glorious lobsters back there."

"Lobsters come expensive."

"Damn the expense! Lobsters, ducklings, peas, nice tender little peas, and a gooseberry tart with cream."

Boniface ticked off the items on pudgy fingers.

"It can be done," he declared triumphantly, "and it shall be done. At what hour?"

"One sharp. Lay for three. If the third doesn't turn up, we shall eat his share. We are not Pussyfooters."

"No," said Boniface decidedly.

"But the day is hot, too hot for that old Scotch ale of yours."

"You've 'eard of my Scotch ale?"

"The nectar of chill October! Shall we say, cider cup? A quart of Devonshire cider, one glass of brandy, one glass of curaçao, borage, and a bottle of Schweppes' soda-water. Thin goblets, if you have them."

Boniface beamed at him.

"I don't know who you are, sir, but I shall wait on you myself. One sharp—The Stag."

He hastened away.

Ralph was immensely impressed.

"You're a knock-out, Miles."

"You go and swim; I'll float into Issell's shop. Join me there after your bathe. If I'm not there, you'll find me at The Stag."

"You won't find it easy to escape from Adam Issell."

II

Purdie was in no hurry to enter the shop. He stared critically at the only sample of wall-paper in the window. He recognised at a glance its merit. The designer of such a paper might be a genius. He might be a bore. Ralph was twenty-five, lucky fellow, but at twenty-five the copper of speech might be mistaken for gold.

He entered the shop, thoughtfully. The door-bell tinkled. For a minute he was alone, surveying the modest premises, drawing swift inferences from what he saw and did not see. The shop presented a bleak, ill-nourished appearance familiar to the journalist. How could the owner of such a shop compete with the big emporia? The mere problem of obtaining skilled labour must be almost insoluble. If he undertook a job of painting and decorating, he would have to fall back upon the less-skilled artisans rejected by the big firms.

Adam Issell entered, and the two men looked at each other. Purdie was humorously aware that the preconceived idea had blurred his powers of observation and perception. He had been told that Issell was a sage. He beheld a tall, thin man, clean shaven, with abundant iron-grey hair, a mane of it. A sanguine complexion accentuated the blueness of the eyes, very heavily lidded, with arched eyebrows above them. Issell reminded

Purdie of a portrait of Shelley. Really the resemblance was slight, poetically so. Meeting Issell, and knowing nothing about him, he might have thought to himself: "This old fellow writes lyrics in his leisure moments."

"I want to see some wall-papers."

No preconceived idea blurred Issell's vision of Purdie. Had he known, for example, that the journalist was a friend of "the Captain," he might have received him more genially. Adam was not feeling genial that morning. He had not felt himself since his "ladybird" flew away. He was contemplating with dismay and repugnance closing his shop for ever, and accepting a billet as designer in some big factory. That was within his reach. That meant cutting loose from Moscombe. His sister told him emphatically, with needless repetitions, that he should have done so before the War.

His blue eyes lingered upon Purdie's face and massive figure.

"A Philistine," he thought.

"Wall-papers?" he repeated, with a faint sigh. "Ah, yes. For a big or small room?"

"My sitting-room, in my London flat. Medium size."

"Well lighted?"

"Yes, the room faces south."

"You like bright papers?"

"Do I?"

"Don't you?" The Sage spoke with slight impatience. What did it matter whether or not he sold a few more rolls of paper to Philistine customers?

"To be entirely frank with you," said Purdie, "I have not devoted much thought to—wall-papers. I have taken them as—as I found them, good, bad and indifferent."

"Yes, yes." Issell sighed again. Why should he bother to ask questions? Habit alone made him persevere.

"Tell me what furniture you have."

"I have some rather good stuff."

"Old?"

"I have reason to think so."

The Sage regarded him attentively. Some "quality" in Purdie's resonant voice challenged interest. He said more briskly:

"I hold theories about wall-papers."

Purdie smiled. At last they were coming to grips.

"Please tell me about your theories."

"I think wall-papers immensely important. If a customer can cover his walls with pictures, books, or prints, I recommend distemper. It's quite another matter if the wall-paper is, in itself, to be decorative. I designed a paper for a man who owned some lac furniture and beautiful old glass, lustra, honeypots, bowls and porringers. The paper was black with a delicate pyrus japonica pattern upon it. My customer was pleased."

"He must have been," said Purdie warmly.

"Such papers are very expensive. But why grudge a few extra pounds over something that exercises a constant and subtile influence upon your life?"

"Why indeed?"

"To my mind, the choice of a suitable paper is like choosing a wife. You have to live with it. When I think of some of the wall-papers in this town, I am surprised the people who live with them are not dead."

"I was tremendously taken with the paper in your window."

"Really?" Faint incredulity informed the Sage's voice. He said decidedly: "That paper is not suitable for you."

"Why not?"

"It is, designedly, virginal, vernal. You would find it, on more intimate acquaintance, slightly saccharine."

"Well, perhaps I should."

"I could hardly be a party to your buying that paper for your sitting-room in London. The freshness of it would vanish in six weeks. I will show you some others. This shop is inconveniently small. Will you come into my studio?"

"With pleasure."

Purdie found himself in the studio. Issell went to a large press made of chestnut wood, a Breton armoire. Purdie glanced about him. The room revealed the Sage amazingly. To a trained pair of eyes, objects stood saliently out as if they were bumps giving information to a phrenologist. There were many books in low bookcases, books bought when Adam Issell earned a regular salary, books picked up for a few pence in the Charing Cross Road. Their titles indicated a wide field of research. Obviously, the Sage read omnivorously, browsing in pastures old and new. Issell, turning from the armoire with half a dozen rolls of paper tucked under his arm, beheld the Philistine padding round his bookcases, sniffing at his beloved books, muttering and growling to himself.

"You read?" he asked.

Purdie stood still.

"I write."

"A writer must read."

"If he cannot pick up his stuff at first hand. Your books tell me that I have scarcely pushed beyond the borders of vast territories explored by you."

The Sage laughed softly, for the first time.

"I don't read much now; I think. What of *this?*"

Facing the window was a sloping board. Upon it Issell unrolled a paper. Purdie was expecting something just right, something that would illustrate the Sage's power of perception. He said disgustedly:

"It's awful, horrible."

The Sage laughed again.

"So it is. I beg your pardon. You—you don't know, you can't imagine what I suffer with some customers. I show them my best; they choose my worst. I didn't design that paper. I wanted to see if you hated what I hated. You forgive me?"

"With all my heart. This is jolly. I'm enjoying myself. You have really misjudged me. I'm ugly as sin, but I've a sense of beauty. Show me your own papers. Show me something likely to please an old bachelor who wants to live amicably with his wall-paper."

"This might do."

He unfolded another roll. The design was simple and severe, but the colour was delicious, a soft grey.

"I'll have that."

"But you haven't seen the others," protested Issell. "Do you think that I put my biggest strawberries on top of the pottle?"

"I take that grey paper. I believe in love at first sight. Not with women," he added hastily.

The Sage stared at him. Any general observation that

might be interpreted as a contribution to the stock in trade of a sage aroused immediate comment.

"You, a young man, don't believe in love at first sight?"

"I'm not young. I've battered my way to my convictions. Love at first sight is an iridescent bubble, blown by romantic children out of the soap and water of irresponsible novelists."

"I am an old man; not so old in years, old in my thoughts; old, too old, in my ways," his voice faltered; "but I believe in love at first sight, the rushing together of pure spirits, the—the sacramental union of youth and innocence."

Purdie said dourly:

"You are years younger than I am." He continued irritably, and with an odd restraint: "You take a lot for granted. Youth—innocence—pure spirits. Are we in the garden of Eden?"

"We live in the gardens we make for ourselves."

Purdie shrugged his broad shoulders, but he remembered what Ralph had said the night before. Adam Issell had been wrecked at Moscombe. He had lingered on in such a place because he couldn't tear himself away from it, away from some appalling cemetery that held his dead wife. Looking at Issell, he could believe that such a man married his first love and remained faithful to her. Youth—Issell was still a child!—had met Innocence, sacramentally, and Innocence was dead.

Envy, not pity, assailed a man who had seen hecatombs of slain, horrors unrepeatable, scenes which even he dared not describe, and had remained not unmoved, not callous, but supremely aloof, supremely detached, ever

sensible that he was there impersonally as a recorder, a witness.

"Show me papers you have designed."

He spoke curtly. Issell obeyed, with a faint flush upon his thin cheeks.

III

Purdie was a man of action, who acted quickly. Astonishing stories about him were current in London, "scoops" that he had "put through," incredible distances covered during a night in a motor-car or an aeroplane. Even before the War, when he was unknown outside Fleet Street, editors, whether they liked him or not, admitted that he always "got there." He turned up, grinning, when he was wanted. Occasionally he turned up scowling when he wasn't. Call him in American slang "a live wire," and have done with it.

Within ten minutes he made up his mind, decisively, that Ralph had not brought him to Moscombe on a fool's errand. Issell, in his way, *was* a genius, an eccentric, a child not out of leading strings and never likely to be, helplessly lacking in those pushing and driving qualities which command recognition and material success.

Top-dog stared at under-dog.

"Your work ought to be better known," said Purdie.

Adam Issell shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall make it my business," continued Purdie quietly, "to put you in touch with the right people. You may have heard of me. I'm Miles Purdie."

The Sage had heard of Miles Purdie and said so gracefully, with due acknowledgment of the war correspondent's vivid powers of description. He ended:

"Captain Somervell mentioned your name to me. Mr. Purdie."

"Did he? Perhaps he hinted that I might be able to help you to help yourself?"

"No. He said, I remember, that he was proud to be your friend; that you had been kind to him in Flanders."

Purdie nodded, pleased with Ralph, appreciating his reserves.

"Ralph Somervell," he went on, "motored me over here. At this moment he is cooling himself in the English Channel. He will come in presently. We are lunching together at The Stag. Will you join us, Mr. Issell?"

The Sage hesitated.

"Of course you will!" exclaimed Purdie genially.

"It would be churlish to refuse so kind an invitation."

"Good. That's settled. Before Somervell rolls up, may I ask you some questions?"

"You are very kind."

"I have been under-dog." He spoke grimly. "I can never forget that. It has coloured and discoloured my life. Now then," he became brisk again, "tell me, if you can and will, why your work is not better known. You know that it's good, don't you? Of course you do. We are never really in doubt about that. You must have had the right start, Mr. Issell."

"I did—I did." He looked uneasy, slightly bewildered; at a loss, evidently, to explain himself. He went on lamely, halting along the past, out of tune with it.

"I was apprenticed to a big London firm. I began with a paint-pot and paste-pot. I suppose I had ideas. I used to draw when I was a child. I was always drawing. Then my first chance came. I was put into the designing

room. I was quite happy there. And after my work, I read. That was my life for many, many years—drawing and reading—and, when I could, going to the National collections. The firm kept on increasing my salary, but what I did was theirs, you understand?"

"I understand perfectly."

"It—it seemed quite fair at the time. I was satisfied."

"But, hang it! you oughtn't to have been."

Top-dog snarled.

"We live with our illusions, Mr. Purdie. I can only affirm that I was happy. And I saved money. Enough to justify marriage. I was thirty-six when I married; too old, perhaps."

"Um!"

"My wife died."

"So Somervell told me."

"She died here, and, somehow, I remained here. I bought this business. The partners of my firm pressed me to stay with them. They offered me a better salary. But I had a child."

He paused. Insight, however keen, may be blurred by oversight. Purdie had not heard till this moment of a child. A child meant nothing to him.

"Yes?"

"The child was delicate. It thrived wonderfully in Moscombe. So—I stayed on and on, till—till I took root."

"I see."

But, really he didn't. How could he? He overlooked the overwhelming part played by Miranda in the tragedy of a life spent in the wrong place, amongst the wrong

people. Adam Issell was not quite the dreaming sentimentalist that Purdie deemed him to be. He might have torn himself from what was left in Moscombe cemetery, but he believed, rightly or wrongly, that his baby would perish in London. He went on, in a different tone:

"I did fairly well at first. I sold some dreadful papers; I decorated and painted some of the ugliest houses in the world; but since the War I have been going behind. I tried to sell my own papers, but they were not legally mine. They belonged to the London firm. I buy my own papers from them. I still sell them designs."

"And take what they offer you?"

"Yes."

"We shall get you out of this."

"I—I am contemplating that. I must do something."

"Do or be done," said Purdie cheerfully.

He supposed that the tale had been told and accepted it as complete. Adam Issell, as a struggler, deserved help. He would get it, if Purdie knew himself. And a lame dog could be left for the moment on the wrong side of the stile. Adam Issell, as sage, remained a more interesting object to contemplate and analyse.

"You paint pictures, Mr. Issell?"

"Impressions, Mr. Purdie; impressions. The colour of life is as appealing to me as its rhythm."

Purdie glanced at the impressions not impressed by them. But, on principle, he said a few kindly words which the Sage accepted with a derisive smile.

"I painted them to please myself," he added whimsically. "They must be bad, because I sell a few here,

generally to people who see the Forest from the char-à-banc point of view."

"Good phrase," said Purdie; "may I annex it?"

"It is yours."

Purdie turned from the "impressions" to a cast of the Venus of Milo. The studio was full of "bits" that indicated love of form; cheap casts bought for a few shillings, a cabinet of "cripples" in early English porcelain, beautiful mezzotints lacking margins, a miniature or two. These had served to train the eyes and mind of Miranda.

"Am I keeping you from your work?"

The Sage made a gesture.

"The bell has not tinkled since you rang it. It's becoming atrophied from disuse."

Presently it did tinkle.

Somervell, fresh from a swim out to sea, walked in.

IV

The luncheon was an enormous success.

When Boniface brought the coffee, Purdie produced three big cigars of superlative quality.

The Sage talked. Away from his shop and studio, leaving behind him what Chateaubriand calls "toute l'amertume et le déboire de mille évènements fâcheux," Adam Issell enjoyed the passing hour. The kindly light of Purdie's inquisitive mind led him on and on.

"Somervell tells me, Mr. Issell, that you hold all human values to be founded on illusion?"

"That is my opinion; my judgment."

"When do we escape from illusion; when does the mirage melt away?"

"When some great man, with a new vision, makes his voice heard above the roar of the multitude. We don't realise values alone. Sunsets were just as beautiful before Turner showed them to us. The curious, subtle, exquisite harmonies of the dirty old Thames were there before Whistler painted them."

"I never thought of that," said the ingenuous Ralph.

The Sage continued:

"There are infinite new combinations of colour harmony, sound harmony, ethical harmony, for us to realise and enjoy when the seer, the prophet, the artist discover them to us. Take this into consideration in our estimation of character. Character is what counts. We are here to develop our characters."

"Or to lose them," said Purdie.

"Nothing is lost. I introduce you, Captain"—he looked kindly at Ralph—"to a man who has endangered his life many times to save others——"

"You can introduce me to Purdie."

"You have saved life?" asked Adam eagerly. His blue eyes scintillated.

"Cut me out of this, please."

"He has saved life," said Somervell.

"Nothing of the sort. Go on, Mr. Issell."

"I introduce," continued the Sage, "a young, ardent man to another who has saved lives. At once imagination makes the hero look heroic. I introduce the same youth to a dealer in black ivory who has done scores of people to death. Imagination traces his character in black lines upon his face. Wainwright was accepted in Whitechapel as a good man till he was convicted. The human mind has become warped by education. Educa-

tion blunts sensibility. It perceives what it anticipates, what it has been trained to anticipate. We think we approach things dispassionately with an open mind, but we are all of us, all of us, slaves to the preconceived notion. A Baptist minister here was regarded for ten years to be the soul of righteousness; he turned out to be an unmitigated scamp."

"Moscombe was too much for him," said Ralph.

"There is something in that," agreed Issell. "One can hardly exaggerate the influence of environment. We are chameleons."

"The Forest of Ys," said Purdie, "accounts for your verdancy, Ralph."

"I'm not verdant. Anyway, I appreciate every word that Mr. Issell says. I agree with him. I say down with the preconceived idea!"

"Why do you say it so savagely?"

Ralph flushed beneath the tan. Purdie was one of the best, but he asked disconcerting questions, and expected them to be answered.

"Why? Because my people force their preconceived ideas on me. I'm a bit fed up with accepting their valuations."

He spoke quietly, secretly thanking his stars that Purdie had not yet heard of Miranda. To his relief the Sage went on:

"We wear blinkers."

"Chameleons in blinkers!" ejaculated Purdie. "Kamerad!" He made the hailing sign of distress, holding up both hands. Then, in his turn, he began to talk amusingly, citing case after case that supported the Sage's theory. People really *looked* what you thought them to

be, particularly women. When he paused to examine sorrowfully a moribund Corona, Issell said with emphasis:

"You don't seem to have a high opinion of women, Mr. Purdie."

"Not some women, Mr. Issell. The preconceived idea affects women even more than men."

"I dispute that."

"Good!"

"Women, especially young women, possess intuition. My daughter, for instance, disliked and distrusted that Baptist minister."

"Really? You have a daughter."

"Yes, thank God!"

Ralph, being a Somervell, was able to assume a mask. When Purdie glanced at him, he pretended to yawn.

"You never told me that Mr. Issell had a daughter."

"Didn't I?" said Ralph.

"I wish you could meet her, Mr. Purdie, but she is away from home."

Purdie nodded.

"The Captain," said Issell, "met her, but he doesn't know her. He talked to me, not to her."

Purdie thought to himself:

"This is the child that wrecked the father. Probably a fiddle-headed, unattractive girl. Master Ralph wouldn't have talked to Issell if his daughter had been anything out of the ordinary." Thus lightly he dismissed Miranda, but in his retentive memory the child who had exacted sacrifice, self-effacement, remained dormant.

The Sage returned to his shop.

v

As soon as he was alone with Ralph, Purdie summed up the situation.

"I shall butt in."

"It's most awfully good of you."

"It's most awfully good for me, you mean. I get more self-centred every day. Yes; I shall butt in, and I shall butt this sage out of Moscombe. He must abandon wall-papers, and give his undivided attention to chintzes and cretonnes. A big market there. The firm he first worked for has taken all his designs at their own price. I don't blame 'em. It's business. I haven't a doubt that his designs have made them famous, and, of course, they've kept his name dark."

"Beasts!"

"Not at all. Merely the instinct of self-preservation in its up-to-date form. I shall get people bidding, and bidding big, for Issell designs. Want to have a tenner about it?"

"If I betted, I should back you, Miles. He's a rare old bird, isn't he?"

"He's rare right enough, and hardly out of swaddling clothes. He won't attain your ripe age."

"You always talk as if I were an infant."

Purdie chuckled.

"You are, Ralph. That's why I like you. You arouse paternal sensibilities. Shall we mouch round Moscombe? Then we shall enjoy our tea in the garden of Chorley House."

Ralph returned home, delighted, as he well might be, with the success of the expedition. On the morrow, he would meet Miranda. He thrilled at the thought, and

knew that he thrilled. But, being a Somervell, he told himself that he must restrain himself in the presence of the maiden, not "rush" things. He must persuade her to leave service with every argument at his command. Why had she assumed the absurd name of Wensdy?

If the Issells moved to London, the ordinary decencies of courtship could be observed. Taking a swallow's flight into a happier future, he beheld himself giving a luncheon at, say, Claridge's to his people. Colonel and Mrs. Somervell would be invited to meet the Issells, the designer of chintzes "whom everybody is talking about" and his charming daughter. He had made a slight initial blunder in mentioning Adam to his father at dinner. He had imposed upon his sire the preconceived idea of a genius stranded at Moscombe. There was the bare possibility that the Colonel, repeating as his own (a favourite trick of his) what Miles Purdie had said, and mentioning incidentally to a friend that there was a sage in Moscombe, might learn, to his consternation that the sage kept a shop. If he discovered that——!

However, Ralph dismissed this contingency as negligible. Purdie sat beside him, with no stomach for talk to the accompaniment of machinery. The pre-war car ran smoothly but not silently. After leaving Whitechurch, Ralph allowed his mind to dwell solely upon Miranda. Surely she was the sweetest maid in the world. The little witch liked him. She had trembled, bless her! at sight of him. She had blushed deliciously. He was a soldier, a fighter, not a carpet knight. He would fight hard for Miranda. If he won her, old Miles would stand stoutly by his side. The three of them would vanquish the enemy!

The enemy——!

If any man had dared to tell him six weeks previously, that he would ever regard his parents as enemies, Captain Somervell, D.S.O., would have slapped a presumptuous cheek.

The car passed one of the Forest enclosures.

"Confound enclosures," thought Ralph. Enclosures brought to mind the stone-walled park, and the big barrack of a house in Devon, where the Head of the Family lived in solitary state. Well, he was a widower on the sunny side of sixty. He might marry again and beget a son. Why didn't he? He must be lacking in initiative.

Enough has been recorded to indicate that a gallant fellow, born and bred in enclosures, disdained them.

He soared joyously into the blue of illimitable space.

CHAPTER VI

ARIEL INTERFERES

I

PURDIE refused many invitations, because he was terrified of well-meaning hosts who attempted to amuse and entertain him. When Ralph urged him to spend ten days at Chorley House, he had said incisively:

"I want a change; but you won't ask me to play any damned games, will you? I must have some hours each day to myself. I like to be left alone. Sometimes I think that people who try to entertain everybody succeed in entertaining nobody but themselves."

"That's understood, Miles. If you come to us you shall do what you like when you like and where you like."

It was easy to leave such a guest to his own resources.

On Thursday, at luncheon, Mrs. Somervell said to her son:

"And what are your plans for this afternoon, Ralph?"

Ralph had anticipated this maternal solicitude.

"Old Miles," he replied easily, "has had enough of my society this morning, so I shall take a little exercise, which he scorns. I may drop in to tea at Apperton Old Manor."

"Give my love to all of them."

Ralph nodded, well aware that his gentle mother prayed every night that her dear boy would give his love to

one of them. Alice Apperton was the daughter of a squire, who would leave the greater part of his worldly possessions to his son and heir, but an aunt had bequeathed to Alice twenty thousand pounds. A modest fortune in the eyes of a modest mother.

No more was said. Ralph mounted his bicycle, and took the road to Medbery-Hawthorne. He passed the iron gates of the magnate, and dismounted at a convenient angle in the road. He could look up and down the king's highway. Within a dozen yards of the road was a clump of thorns surrounded by bracken. The sun shone in cerulean skies.

"I'm in luck," thought Ralph; "this is my day out as well as Miranda's."

He looked at his watch. It was nearly half-past two. Miranda might appear at any moment. A char-à-banc rumbled by filled with young men and girls. One girl waved her hand to Ralph, who smiled. She blew a kiss to him. Ralph thought: "Perhaps she guesses that I'm waiting for my girl."

He had to wait. The minutes drifted slowly by. A damsel appeared on a bicycle. She approached swiftly. It wasn't Miranda. A man with a bundle excited apprehension. He walked slowly. He might be a villager who knew that Miranda was the new parlourmaid at the Vicarage. Hastily, Ralph seized his pump, and pretended to pump up his front tyre. The man passed, and faded out of sight.

Would she never come?

What would he do, if she didn't come?

At this uneasy moment she flitted into sight. And the road, both ways, was clear.

Abreast of him, she dismounted. He lifted his straw hat. They gazed at each other. Probably, at that instant, telepathy was established. Ralph whispered her name:

"Miranda."

Of course, she knew everything. A lover, the first lover, was calling her. She said, breathlessly:

"I'm late; I couldn't get away sooner."

He pointed to the clump of thorns.

"We'll nip in there."

She followed him in silence. He propped her machine and his own against a small oak. He wondered whether she felt as shy as he did.

"Let's sit down."

As yet she had not spoken any word of greeting. And her confidence in him disarmed him. He had rehearsed the opening scene, but the right lines escaped him. He sat beside her, but not too near her.

"Do you mind my calling you Miranda?"

"N-n-no."

"Would you strain yourself, if you called me—Ralph?"

"I—I don't think I could do that."

"Not if you tried desperately?"

She evaded this. Still breathless, almost tremulous, she spoke the line that she had rehearsed.

"Are you angry with me for not telling you?"

"Angry with—*you*."

"But you looked angry. And, perhaps I ought to have told you. I did think of writing."

"If you would write to me——!"

She said nothing, but she was blushing adorably.

"You are the sweetest thing in all the world."

This, apparently, was his idea of not exceeding the speed limit. She averted her eyes, saying quietly:

"I'm glad you are not angry. What I did had to be done. Aunt Barbie made that plain."

He felt rebuked, and exhibited a trace of contrition by adopting a less perfervid intonation.

"Your aunt hounded you to this?"

"Oh, no, Aunt Barbie has ridiculous ideas. She tried to prevent me. Daddy was upset, too. I did it quite on my own."

"Miranda, dear Miranda, what you have done must be undone."

"But—why?"

"I can't stand your being a—a servant."

"You serve the King, don't you?"

"What has that got to do with it?"

"Do you feel humiliated because you wear the King's livery?"

"That's entirely different."

"Why is it different?"

He exhibited slight impatience, remembering a dictum of the Colonel's, "Never argue with a woman."

"Everybody knows that it is."

"Not quite everybody," she replied. "My father is somebody. I think as"—she continued modestly—"as he has taught me to think. Service is a wonderful blessing, like mercy, reciprocal."

He stared at her, as she went on slowly:

"Father says that we are here to work, to carry on the progress of the world. We can't all serve kings, and even kings have to serve their people. What our work *is* doesn't matter."

"Oh, doesn't it——!"

"I mean, or rather he means—because I am only an echo of Daddy—that all service, whatever it may be, should be rendered joyously. We are just parts of a big machine which the wisest of us don't understand."

He retorted smartly:

"You must know, dear, that service has made your Daddy a poor man."

Her eyes brightened.

"No, no; Daddy is ever so rich apart from money. His work is a gold mine to him."

"But it can't keep you out of slavery."

She laughed at him.

"Slavery——! How unkind you are to Mrs. Merrytree! She has been quite motherly to me."

"Why? Because she thinks you a lady."

"Does she?" Her brows wrinkled.

"Of course she does. She admitted that. You are a mystery to her, and a mystery to me."

She hesitated, perceiving that he was distressed, grievously puzzled. Her voice grew softer:

"It is so simple to me. I am saving Daddy a hundred a year. That means I am giving him a hundred a year. I gloat over that. I'm happier to-day than I was a week ago. And I like my work, I have polished up the silver, and taken all the stains out of the Vicar's coats. Of course I am serving my apprenticeship to—to life. I want to be more than a parlourmaid, but I suppose even you had to learn the goose-step."

With every word she uttered, with every varied inflection, she was, with utter unconsciousness, imposing her personality upon his. And in a dim, undefined fashion

she shone brighter through the mists that encompassed him. No young girl had ever talked to him like this, with such conviction and sincerity. Realising his impotence to silence so sweet, so sublimated an echo, he attacked from another quarter.

"If you feel like that, Miranda, why have you assumed this ridiculous name of Wensdy?"

"Because light revealed me to myself on a Wednesday. I regard Wednesday as my lucky day."

"By Jove! you met me on a Wednesday. But, seriously, assuming another name means—doesn't it?—that you felt a bit ashamed of your job."

"But I don't. Aunt Barbie does. She says that she is an Issell. I don't know what she means. The Issells have never gone into domestic service, but Auntie cooks, scrubs, dusts, and mends for Daddy. If that isn't domestic service, what is?"

"I sympathise with your aunt."

"So do I. To please her, I would call myself Grimes. Daddy has no objections to a parlourmaid calling herself Issell, but he never wastes time over what he calls pestiferous inanities."

Ralph wondered whether she was delicately snubbing him. He used, too frequently, a significant bit of soldier's slang, "I put it across him." Miranda, he felt uneasily, was achieving this feat. He wriggled and frowned.

"Are you sitting on a thorn?" she asked anxiously.

"Metaphorically, perhaps I am."

"I am a thorn to you?"

She regarded him with troubled eyes. Discretion abandoned him. He decided swiftly that he was wasting time, golden minutes, upon pestiferous inanities. A sol-

dier didn't hang himself up in barbed wire. He cut it and pushed on.

"You are the rose of the world to me."

He was now fairly started. A Somervell might be slow to start, but not in the hunting-field or on the battle-ground. He knew, too, that this was a great opportunity, not likely to be repeated. He couldn't ask Miranda to imperil her good name by meeting him on the sly. And how could she understand him unless he made perfectly plain to her his feelings and intentions. . . . His honourable intentions. A girl in her position, however pure, however unsophisticated, might apprehend horrors. As for friendship between man and maid, that, indeed, was a bending twig to lean upon. They had left platonics far behind them, when they met five minutes ago. . . . He knew it; and she knew it. The bold course was always best.

"I love you, Miranda; I love you madly. I want you to be my wife. I wish that I could marry you now, carry you off to India, work for you, cherish you, regardless of everything and everybody."

He meant what he said. His grey eyes sparkled with determination; his outstretched hands trembled. To Miranda he was irresistible; the perfect knight. She almost swooned, closing her eyes, a-quiver from head to foot with emotions strange and sweet. But she might have girded herself against words, the passionate invocation to the brain. Ralph caught her to him, kissed her, pressed her yielding body to his, so tenderly, and yet so firmly, that she surrendered unconditionally. Unable to speak, one thought seemed to dominate consciousness:

"He is mine; I am his."

II

They descended to earth. If experts are to be believed, it is always the woman who is practical first. It may be presumed that she has to be so. From the cradle to the grave ways and means affect women far more than men. When Miranda felt mother earth beneath her feet, she wondered whether her lover had wrecked her hat. Instinctively she smoothed her skirt.

"What next?" she asked demurely.

Ralph, hardly out of the clouds, gripped her hands.

"We must face ructions," he added gallantly. "I don't care. It's a blessed privilege to fight for you. Who wouldn't?"

She said with conviction:

"We can count on Daddy. He is as wise as Solomon."

Ralph kissed her hands.

"I do count on your daddy; and I count on Miles Purdie."

Then he poured into her attentive ear what had already been done by his friend. He ended upon a high note:

"I shall take old Miles into my confidence to-night—this very afternoon. He's a marvel. He has taken an immense fancy to your father. He will boom him. Your daddy will come into his own. That, darling, is a sitter."

Miranda accepted this as final, nodding her head, smiling at her lover.

"You will speak to Mr. Purdie, and I shall tell Daddy."

"You mean—now? When you reach home?"

"Instant minute, as 'me-an'-Kate' say."

"Me-an'-Kate?"

"My co-workers at the Vicarage."

"Must you go back there?"

Miranda looked startled. Such a question provoked insidious misgiving. Trained from a child to consider others, it was almost incredible to her that Ralph—her Ralph—should sweep from his path, as if they were rubbish, her kind employers.

"I couldn't leave Mrs. Merrytree without a parlourmaid."

"No; I suppose not. Still——"

"Yes?"

"I can't argue with you, Miranda, because you get the best of me. I admit that Mrs. Merrytree has claims on you. So have I. You must give her the usual notice."

"Must I?"

"Must you?" He became vehement. "Now, I ask you, dearest, can we meet, except—a—furtively, if you don't give notice?"

"We might."

He hugged her. The unexpectedness of her answer captivated him; it breathed the spirit of adventure.

"Miranda, you are too much for me. I admit that I shall have to play second fiddle to you, you—you superman. And, perhaps, we are going too fast. I wouldn't rush you for the world."

"But you have, Ralph."

As his Christian name left her lips, pianissimo, he experienced qualms. He had rushed her. He had rushed himself into a blind alley.

After an interlude, he said more hopefully:

"Don't tell your father anything to-day. When do you see him again?"

"Next Sunday. I get off every other Sunday. Last Sunday was my Sunday in."

He winced perceptibly.

"You see him next Sunday. Purdie wants to see him. I shall motor him over on Sunday. By that time I shall have him enlisted on our side. But he must see you. When he sees you, he will be doubly interested. Really, I expect protest from Purdie till he sees you."

"Mr. Purdie will see me as a swoose."

"What is a swoose?"

"A swoose is a hybrid between a swan and a goose. You will describe me to him as a swan. He will think of me as a goose. But, when he meets me, I shall appear as a swoose."

She laughed gaily, adding:

"The swoose is a savage bird." She became serious. "You want me to hide this wonderful piece of news from Daddy until Sunday. I—I hate to hide anything from him; but I want to love, honour, and obey you."

"Let me ask your father for you."

"If you insist——!"

"I don't insist upon anything with you, Miranda."

This was gracefully said, and commandeered another interlude. Finally, it was agreed that time should be marked till Sunday.

"I must go," said Miranda. "If I am very late, Daddy will be disappointed and ask questions. I—I simply can't fib to him."

They kissed and parted.

III

Ralph, unwilling to fib to his mother, rode a couple of miles out of his way to Apperton Old Manor. In company with Alice Apperton he took what she called

"A squint at the gees." Alice, fortunately, was unaware that comparisons were being made between heiress and parlourmaid. Judging girls is not unlike judging puppies at a Puppy Show. Points are considered—breeding, action, bone, girth, feet and intelligence. Alice had points. She possessed what Masters of Hounds acclaim—drive. She could hold her own with Ralph in the hunting-field. And at lawn tennis she was "useful."

But nobody accused her of being unduly intelligent, and she lacked that elusive charm which radiated from Miranda. Ralph had always reckoned Alice to be a "pal." He wondered what she would think of Miranda.

Alice proposed a "single" at tennis.

"Give me 'fifteen' and I'll play you for half a crown."

Ralph declined the challenge, not being in flannels, and without shoes or racket.

"You can rig yourself out in George's room."

Ralph said hurriedly:

"The truth is, Alice, I have a guest, bit of a swell. I can't leave him alone."

"But you have."

"He's the war correspondent, Miles Purdie. After luncheon, he writes till tea-time."

"I see. So you biked over here, on this broiling day, to spend ten minutes with me? It was rather nice of you."

She lifted her eyes to his, smiling at him.

Love is reputed to be blind. Obviously, love is blind to defects in the beloved objects. On the other hand, love clears our vision amazingly of other objects. Riding through the Forest of Ys, Ralph noted the translucency of the beech leaves, the cobalt splendour of the mid-

distance, the silvery azure of the skies. Nature had become increasingly beautiful, superlatively so. And he was throbbingly sensitive to this, intensely alive, informed by new energies and potentialities. He saw, in fine, what he had never seen before. He recalled what the Sage had said. The Master, Love, was revealing a more wonderful world to him. "You don't mind, Alice, do you?"

She smiled again; he was blushing.

"Mind your coming here?"

"Mind my nipping off, I mean?"

"You funny old Ralph. What a boy you are! I understand perfectly. Mr. Miles Purdie is a personage. Bring him over to see us."

"I will. Mother sent her love to you."

"You told her you were coming?"

"Yes."

"You know I love your dear mother nearly as much as I love my own."

With a few more perfunctory words he left her.

IV

He pedalled briskly along the level road between Sloden-Pauncefort and Chorley. But Nature, on this lovely afternoon, now wooed his eyes in vain. He was terribly upset. A blinding flash had revealed Alice to him. Full of love himself, overbrimming with the sublimated essence, he had discovered love in her, love for his unworthy self!

Alice believed that he had ridden six miles, through sun and dust, to spend ten minutes with her.

This was the first-fruits of practising to deceive.

She was prepared to accept Mrs. Somervell as a mother!

And his mother, inevitably, would place the same construction upon this ill-considered visit as Alice. He blushed again, as he contemplated himself with detachment, as the idiot who had lost his head and heart upon one afternoon.

In the squire's stables, he had examined Alice knowingly, with a straw, so to speak, in his mouth. He had never heard a French adjective used as a substantive to describe unemotional women—*les frigides*. But he had regarded Alice as temperamentally cool. The Somervells liked women and claret with the chill just off. A mulled woman excited distrust. He couldn't think of Alice as mulled, but he—he had taken the chill off her. She had looked at him warmly.

Ravaged by these reflections, he reached Chorley House, where tea awaited him under the lime trees.

Mrs. Somervell, with delicate hands fluttering above the tea-cups, asked the expected question:

"Have you been to Apperton Old Manor?"

"I just looked in, Mother."

"Whom did you see?"

"I saw Alice."

"Dear Alice! You gave her my love?"

"I did."

Purdie, of course, was drawing his conclusions, blatantly grinning. After tea, Ralph would take Miles into the Forest, away from enclosures, and make a clean breast of everything. Suddenly, it occurred to him that Purdie rarely talked of women. He was a man's man. He remembered that his friend, the most hospitable of

hosts, never entertained women. And yet he talked to Mrs. Somervell and Ruth charmingly.

Purdie enjoyed his tea, and his pipe afterwards. He said, with his jolly laugh:

"I've done some good work, Mrs. Somervell. I've earned my tea."

"An inspired leading article?"

"Lord, no. Leaders *are* inspired, but only by editors. I've written one of my spoof papers."

"Spoof papers?"

Ralph explained, not Purdie:

"Miles is a born spoofer, Mother. All successful journalists are. He pulls the leg of the British Public. As a matter of fact, I can never make out when he is serious and when he isn't."

"What a tribute!" ejaculated Purdie.

"You didn't spoof us about the War?" asked Ruth anxiously.

"No, Miss Somervell, I didn't."

"What do you mean, Mr. Purdie, by a spoof paper?"

His eyes twinkled behind his spectacles.

"This is the silly season, when people do silly things like taking holidays, and pretending that they like bathing when they don't. It's my happy privilege to start them writing silly letters. I turn loose the hare. Any hare will do, if he legs it fast enough, and twists and turns. The B.P. catches my hare and cooks it to a crisp. 'Do the Girls Propose?' That is the heading of the paper I wrote this afternoon."

"I hope they don't," murmured Mrs. Somervell.

Ralph, thinking of Alice Apperton, said impulsively:

"Some of 'em do."

"Habet!" shouted Purdie.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Purdie," murmured Mrs. Somervell.

"I beg yours, Mrs. Somervell, I shouted with triumph. Ralph bit the dust which I am scattering. I predict that our Correspondence Column will be filled for the next fortnight, and our circulation increased."

For five minutes he talked of spoof articles and a spoofed public. The Colonel was not present.

"How odd Mr. Purdie is," thought Ruth, "but I like him."

V

Ralph and Purdie walked through the white gate of Chorley House as six was striking from Chorley Church tower. They ascended a hill, smoking their pipes, and debouched upon the open moor To the east the spire of Puddenhurst Church rose gracefully out of the enbosomed woods; to the south, beyond the Forest and the Solent, delicately blue on the horizon, lay the Isle of Wight. From the spot where Purdie stood no houses could be seen.

"We have the world to ourselves," said Purdie. Somewhat to the younger man's surprise, he felt his arm pressed affectionately, as his friend went on: "I am glad I came here. I feel reinvigorated. And you have left me alone, all you nice people."

"Nice. That isn't a favourite adjective of yours, Miles."

"It describes the Somervells, my dear fellow. You are nice in your ways, nice in your talk, nice in your thoughts, nice in your adjustments."

"Look here, Miles, you suspend nice judgment of me

for a moment. I—I want to talk about myself and—and somebody else."

Purdie laughed.

"Somebody at Apperton Old Manor? I caught on, Ralph. I'm wondering what you would like for a wedding present."

"You haven't caught on at all. I'm going to surprise you, Miles; I am indeed. And I want you to help me. I count desperately on your help."

"Out with it!"

Thus adjured, Ralph put his case in what Purdie might have termed "tabloid form."

"This afternon, Miles, at three, I asked a parlourmaid to become my wife, and, praise be to God! she accepted me."

Ralph had never seen Purdie at a loss for words till this instant. Positively, he gasped, recoiling a couple of steps, staring at Ralph, a new Ralph, with blinking eyes.

"A—a parlourmaid——!"

Ralph nodded. After his plunge, he emerged from the whirlpool red of countenance and smiling. The expression on Purdie's freckled face would have provoked a smile from a mute at a funeral.

Purdie became himself, alert, interrogative.

"I didn't think you had it in you. 'A marriage has been arranged, and will probably not take place, between Captain Somervell, D.S.O., and a—parlourmaid'!"

"If I know myself, the marriage will take place."

"Who is she?"

"Adam Issell's daughter, Miranda."

"Prospero's daughter! And Prospero, 'neglecting

worldly ends, all dedicated to closeness, and the bettering of the mind,' knows of this?"

"He doesn't. She's a wonder, Miles."

"She ought to be with that name." He dropped his light tone. "Issell's daughter, who—who thrived in Moscombe. Speed up!"

Ralph, however, picked his way, very slowly.

"Miles, for God's sake, don't think too badly of me. You are my greatest friend. You may feel hurt that I didn't speak of Miranda to you when I asked you to come down here. But I swear that I hardly knew what I felt ten days ago. I was honest with you, even if I deceived myself. I wanted you to help Issell, not me. I had made up my mind to—to put Miranda out of it till you had met Issell and recognised, as you did, that he was a man to help. This afternoon I was swept off my feet by the sweetness of her. . . ."

The romantic tale was told without interruption from Purdie.

"You will see her on Sunday?" asked Ralph.

"Yes."

"I look forward to that."

"Um!"

"You don't?"

Purdie shook the ashes from his pipe, and put it in his pocket. He was giving undivided attention to his friend, frowning, not smiling, grappling with facts, trying to co-ordinate them.

He repeated gravely:

"I didn't think you had it in you. My preconceived ideas of you are in the melting-pot. I would rather not discuss your Miranda till I meet her. I accept, with rea-

sonable reservations, what you say about Adam Issell's daughter. We'll grant that she is a perfect darling and a parlourmaid. Do you really expect your people to cotton to her?"

"If they could see her as she is they would. If they met her at a place like Apperton Old Manor they would rave about her."

"Would they? I wonder! But, my dear man, how can I help you? You say you count on me. That's very flattering. But how am I to force even a paragon of a parlourmaid down the throat of Colonel Somervell?"

Ralph replied hopefully:

"I have tremendous faith in you, old chap."

"I have a certain amount of faith in myself, the greater, perhaps, because I realise my disabilities. I like your father, Ralph; he likes me, but he winced when I told him my mother was a dairymaid. She was the daughter of a small and respectable farmer."

"Why did you keep that dark?"

"Perhaps I wanted to rub into him that the stream can rise higher than its source. No matter. How the deuce am I to help you?"

Ralph began tentatively. He was aware that Purdie would draw his own inferences from what he might say. And he wanted to be honest, entirely frank with a friend who detested humbug.

"I thought, Miles, that you might boom Adam Issell."

"I shall have a shot at it. I think of him now as Prospero, cut off from his lawful rights and prerogatives. Booming him and his wares will take time. Meanwhile Miranda remains a parlourmaid."

"Nobody knows that. God bless Aunt Barbie! Thanks

to her Miranda is Mary Wensdy. You see, Miles, if Issell left Moscombe, if he went to London, and if, through you, he was acknowledged as a great artist, a superb designer, why then his daughter would be regarded by my people with different eyes."

"I follow you through many ifs. I add another. *If* it leaks out that Miranda is a parlourmaid, what then?"

"I—I don't know."

"Probably it will leak out, when you least expect it. You tell me that this Mrs. Merrytree believes your Miranda to be a young lady, a mystery. Will she leave it at that? Ten to one she's talking about her amazing parlourmaid to every soul she meets. Are you going to keep away from the girl?"

"I can't."

"You are plotting and planning to meet her, to write to her every day, to get letters from her? Of course you are. And that will leak out. I like betting on certainties. I'll bet you a level hundred that within a fortnight the Forest of Ys will be in gloating possession of the truth. That means civil war at Chorley House. You are up against it, my boy."

Ralph said desperately:

"I can bolt off with her, marry her, and defy the family."

"Not a wise thing to do. Not a pleasant thing for her. She is placed in an abominable position. She, loving you, marrying you, cuts you off from your own people."

"I suppose they'd come round."

"Suppose they don't? Are you dependent on your father?"

"He allows me three hundred a year. He has been very generous to me about money. And he wants me to marry. If—if he cut off supplies, I could go to the Jews. I don't say I would, mind you, in any case."

"You are alluding to your reversionary interest in that place in Devon. By the way, who is the head of your family?"

"Lord Bisterne."

"Bisterne of Bisterne. I've heard of him. One day, humanly speaking, you will be Lord Bisterne?"

"My cousin is nearly sixty, but he might marry again."

"Is he—reactionary?"

"Of course he is."

Purdie relit his pipe and puffed at it in silence.

"I must let all this soak in," he observed.

VI

Little more was said at the time. But that little aroused, devastatingly, Ralph's curiosity. Purdie smoked furiously, puffing out great volumes of smoke. Then, for the second time, he pocketed his pipe and laughed.

"I have had a sort of inspiration."

Ralph nodded hopefully.

"I knew you would. What is it?"

"I can't tell you. If I told you, Ralph, my scheme, such as it is, would be wrecked. But I must act at once. When does the post leave Chorley House?"

"At eight."

"I have barely time. Come on!"

They strode homewards. Purdie added a few curt words:

"I am paying you a compliment, my boy. I am taking

your Miranda at your valuation. On Sunday, I shall take her at my own. But I can't wait till Sunday. Ask no questions. But I must ask you one: You really believe that your people would welcome Miranda Issell as a daughter if they could see her as you see her: a girl of refinement, of intelligence, a gentlewoman according to the Somervell standard?"

Ralph replied earnestly:

"She is all that—and more."

"Um! But don't your people expect you to find a wife with a bit of money. That, I take it, is not too plentiful either at Chorley House or Bisterne."

With even deeper solemnity Ralph assured his friend:

"They would like me to marry Alice Apperton, because she has twenty thousand pounds, but you do my people a gross injustice if you think that money counts with them. As for my cousin, he would be a rich man if he sold some of his land. Father has given up hunting, retrenched all along the line, but he is very comfortably off. And I'm an only son. First and last, they want me to settle down in England with the right sort of wife. Miranda is the right sort, but they will see her—if the truth pops out—as a parlourmaid and the daughter of a Moscombe tradesman."

"You have told me exactly what I wanted to know."

When Chorley House was reached, Purdie hurried to his room. He emerged from it, half an hour later, with two letters which he posted himself. Then he found Ralph and said heartenmgly:

"I have surpassed myself. I could do with a whisky and soda."

He had it.

CHAPTER VII

"PRETTY LADY M."

I

AFTER parting from Ralph, Miranda coasted swiftly down the long hill which rises out of the Whitechurch water-meadows. Unlike her lover, she had no clearer vision of the beauties of Nature. She was concerned with resurveying the now panoramic landscape of her mind. We must remember that she didn't know the Somervells. She had never heard of Lord Bisterne. Chorley House meant nothing to her. She did understand, vaguely, that Ralph would have to fight for her, because he had said so. Beholding him as a gallant soldier, who had served King and Country, she never doubted the issue of the fight. We must remember, further, that she had been educated by her father. If he talked, as he did occasionally, upon class distinctions, he seemed to disdain them. Character counted, nothing else.

Ralph, in fine, presented himself to her intelligence as a young man who was different from other young men of her acquaintance. He had been accepted as a friend by her sire. Prospero had talked of love magically. He had married for love; he had remained faithful to love. Love, in his eyes, was the Master Teacher.

She believed that Love appeared out of the blue with

divine unexpectedness to be recognised instantly. Me-an'-Kate, it is true, had discoloured slightly the clear waters of this conviction. Men, barring the softies, were on the "rampage." Men, so said me-an'-Kate, always wanted something for nothing. They would "go" as far as they could along a road unfamiliar to Miranda, but, apparently, a dangerous road for "pore girls" to travel. The men rushed on; the "pore girls," if they were wise, hung back. Me-an'-Kate, good, kind creatures, spared Miss Innocence—as they called "Mary" behind her back—illuminating details. But they had aroused, by mere suggestiveness, a sense of danger. Miranda was conscious of this when she left the Vicarage. She was about to meet a young man "on the quiet," as her co-workers put it. He might be other than what a not too ignorant virgin deemed him to be. He might—she grew scarlet inwardly—want something for nothing.

But he didn't.

He had vindicated gloriously her faith in him.

Not telling her father everything "instant minute" was the only fly in her ointment—really a midge.

To her delight, upon her arrival at her father's house, and after many fond embraces, she found the Sage as eager to talk about the Captain as she was. The Captain was a splendid young fellow; a youth not entirely engrossed by his own affairs. He had produced Purdie, the worker of miracles, the puller of strings, the God out of the Machine. Purdie, we may believe, had dominated Adam Issell as he dominated nearly every man with whom he came in contact.

"I shall make it my business to put you in touch with the right people."

The Sage accepted this as a *fait accompli.*

"What will he do?" asked Miranda.

"I have not been in touch with the right people," said Prospero, "since I left London."

"Or before, you beloved man."

"As to that, my firm ranked high; they were not ungenerous. But Mr. Purdie made it plain to me that my designs have been the property of a close corporation."

"Close! I should think so."

"They have never been submitted to the world's market. Mr. Purdie has performed on me, child, an operation for cataract. To-day I can read the small print of what we may term commercial activities. I have been blind; a groper in by-ways. That phase is past. I—I cast it from me."

"Blinkers."

"You are right, darling; blinkers. And I owe this to young Somervell. I am filled with gratitude to him. Any worldly success that may accrue to me will come, really, from him. He is a remarkable youth. He combines simplicity of diction with directness of action. He is a sportsman; a rider to hounds. He rides straight and hard."

"He—he does," admitted Miranda.

"Perhaps I have ignored men of his class."

"What do you mean by class, Daddy?"

"I dislike the word, as you know. In a well-ordered world, the peculiar and fettering distinctions of class would cease to be. What are we in the all-seeing eyes of the Great Designer? Just men and women with work to be done. You have heard me say so a thousand times."

"Indeed, I have, Daddy. But, tell me, in what sense

have you ignored men of Captain Somervell's class? I don't quite know what his class is."

"Nor do I, Miranda. He belongs, however, to what is foolishly called the upper class. I infer that to be a fact, because he never mentions it. Somervell is a good name. Many trifles stick in my memory which I wish I could forget. There is a Lord Bisterne, the Head of the Somervell family, a many-acred magnate. He is, probably, a kinsman of our Captain."

Our Captain! Miranda smiled as Prospero continued:

"Young Somervell comes of a reactionary stock. All the more creditable to him that he rises above it. He assumes no airs with me, and on that account I am the more ready to acknowledge his graces. But, bless me, why am I dithering on about him and myself? Tell me, Ladybird, about yourself. You look blooming. I am sure that all is well with you."

"Daddy dear, it is. I am ever so happy."

"My mind is greatly relieved. I—I feared prickings; the tiny exacerbations of domestic service, or, indeed, of any service. Seeing the colour in your dear cheeks, the sparkle in your clear eyes, I feel that I must indite a pæan of thanksgiving and dispatch it forthwith to the kind Mrs. Merrytree."

"You forget that I am Mary Wensdy to her."

"So I did." He frowned, shaking his head. "That, child, was a mistake. You should have sailed into this new channel under your own flag. Complications might arise. However——!"

He shrugged his shoulders, took her face between his slender hands, and kissed her.

She was back at the Vicarage at ten.

II

On Sunday afternoon Purdie and Ralph motored over to Moscombe. Prospero was expecting them, because the Captain had written to say that they were coming. He had also written to Miranda, and when she had read and kissed the perfervid epistle many times, she slipped it under her "livery," against a soft bosom, where we will leave it.

She experienced qualms and flutterings of conscience when her father said to her about four o'clock:

"I am expecting the Captain and Mr. Purdie. I may have to talk apart with Mr. Purdie on business. You will entertain the Captain."

"I will do my best, Daddy."

Some time after tea, she reflected, she would be called upon to entertain Mr. Purdie. The Captain would be talking apart with her father on very important business.

She was wearing her prettiest summer frock, made by herself, but designed by her father. It had cost, hat and all, less than thirty shillings. No man, except a man-milliner, could guess that. And no man can describe it. The general effect may be timidly indicated. It suggested the long-ago days of Dolly Varden. The frock was quaintly fashioned out of pale pink-flowered voile; the flowers on the voile never grew in any garden. Out of a filmy fichu rose Miranda's slender neck. The fichu was caught at the breast by a Madame Abel Chatenay rose, pinned in by Mrs. Merrytree herself. The hat suggested a happy hybrid between sun-bonnet and mushroom. The front was turned up, revealing the ripples of Miranda's brown hair, simply parted in the middle. A broad riband (which had cost more than the hat) encircled the crown

of the straw, formed a big bow in the middle of it, and, hanging in a pretty curve, came to a loose end in another bow under Miranda's chin. The ribbon matched the nondescript flowers of the voile. From under the hat peeped two curls, framing a piquant little face. Mrs. Merrytree, now fully prepared for anything, kissed the dimpling cheeks before she added the rose, saying, almost in awed accents:

"Really, Mary, you might be a princess in disguise going to meet a fairy prince."

Mary replied primly:

"I'm going to meet my father, m'm. He designed this costume."

"Costume" was the right word for a frock, according to me-an'-Kate. They had not quite approved of the flowered voile.

"Not much style about it, dear, is there?" asked Kate.

"I do fancy a bit o' colour," murmured Cook. "Emerald green, now, in a sports coat, is so dressy."

Mrs. Merrytree was not very quick-witted, but she detected in Mary's intonation a tincture of derision. "Costume," she decided, had been annexed from me-an'-Kate. She said pleasantly:

"You are going to see your father, Mr. Wensdy."

Thus far would she go in her passionate quest for information, no farther. It was far enough. Mary suddenly exhibited confusion. Mrs. Merrytree had given her a lovely rose and she had kissed her for the first time. She had been consistently kind and considerate to Mary. To deceive such a mistress seemed to Miranda "horrid." Without pausing to reflect, dropping the conventional prim method of address, she said as equal to equal:

"His name is not Wensdy."

If she expected astonishment, Miranda was disappointed. Mrs. Merrytree nodded majestically. Miranda went on, blushingly:

"I can say to you in confidence, that no member of my family has been in service. Not that my father cares two straws about that. He is far too—too big. But my aunt's outlook is narrow. She was miserable about my being a parlourmaid. To please her, and against my wonderful daddy's wishes, I took the name of Wensdy, as—as a sort of feeble joke. It happened to be on a Wednesday that I decided to go to Mrs. Paxton. You won't tell anybody that my name is not Wensdy, will you? And you won't ask me any more questions, because you are so kind."

For answer, Mrs. Merrytree kissed her again, and returned to her drawing-room afire with excitement.

"Who is her father? Who can he be?" she thought.

Only the day before, she had picked up, in a passage, a cambric handkerchief, which belonged, as she discovered in ten minutes, to Mary. In the corner was a tiny embroidered wreath, with "M" in the centre of it. Six of these filmy hankies had been the Christmas present of Prospero to his daughter. Aunt Barbie sniffed when she saw them. So did Mrs. Merrytree, in another sense. The nostrils of Curiosity were titillated. Miranda had been careful about her linen. What was new was marked "M. Wensdy." Upon the old marks "M. I." she had stitched bits of tape plainly inscribed with her *nom de guerre*. But she hadn't the heart to deface her pretty hankies. And she took them with her because they brought to mind so vividly the donor. Little did she

guess what inferences would be drawn from the "M" in its embroidered wreath.

Mrs. Merrytree, in the privacy of her drawing-room, took from her davenport *The Prattler*. It was pictorially illustrated, and enjoyed an immense circulation. In it, as part proprietor and occasional contributor, Mr. Miles Purdie happened, by the luck of things, to be interested.

Pince-nez on nose, she read for the twentieth time at least the following paragraph:

"A ripple of excitement has been raised upon the placid surface of social life in one of our southern counties. An eccentric nobleman of ancient lineage has insisted that his daughter should go into service. We are credibly informed that the young and charming lady in question is now actually a parlourmaid, incognita. We may be able to say more in our next issue. The nobleman, a belted earl, is not, as might be rashly supposed, in impoverished circumstances. Far from it! But he holds the view, since the War, that the barrier between rank and file must be broken down. Evidently, his lordship practises what he preaches. But—but what does pretty Lady M. say about it?"

"I never jump to hasty conclusions," thought Mrs. Merrytree.

To say that Miles Purdie was staggered when he met Miranda describes inadequately the situation. He had prepared himself for prettiness. Prospero's daughter might be bewitching. But the odds, he decided, were against that. She had bewitched a sprig of quality. As much could be said of many choristers in musical comedies. On the other hand, from the ranks of such choristers, choice specimens had been culled by young men of rank and fashion and raised on high, justifying a rash experiment in eugenics.

He had been prepared also for intelligence. His friend,

not admitted to friendship without examination, was unlikely to fall in love with a giggling fool.

What astounded him was Miranda's air of distinction. Purdie lifted his hat to distinction wherever he found it. And he had found it in unexpected places, beneath the khaki of a Tommy, beneath the bib of a typist.

"This affair is serious," he thought.

Meanwhile, he talked to Prospero. Ralph went into the kitchen with Miranda to help her get ready an excellent tea. Aunt Barbie was spending the afternoon with Mrs. Paxton. "Is this going to be a comedy or a tragedy?" thought Purdie.

Nevertheless, he gave undivided attention to Prospero.

"I told you, Mr. Issell, that I would try to get you in touch with the right people. This is what I propose, but you must keep it to yourself"—Prospero inclined his dignified head—"and your daughter. She, by the way, is charming."

"She is the best daughter that ever lived, Mr. Purdie."

"I am interested as part proprietor in a daily paper with a big circulation. We often offer large cash prizes, ostensibly to encourage others, really to advertise ourselves. A business motive, you understand, underlies what appears to be public spirit. Within a few days we shall offer £500 for a design for a chintz or cretonne. You can send in as many designs as you like. If you should happen to win the prize, your design will belong to us. We can do what we like with it."

"I understand."

"If you win the first prize—there will be others—your position as a designer will be established. You will be recognised and acknowledged as a first-class artist. Your

name will be known far and wide. You won't have to hawk your wares. The right people will come to you."

"If I win the prize——?"

"I believe—I may be mistaken—that you will win it. Even if you don't, your designs will become known. Now—get to work, and good luck to you. You will receive from me full information as soon as I return to London."

Issell was hardly able to express his gratitude. Unbusinesslike himself, he grasped the essential fact that he was in the hands of a business man of rare executive ability who inspired absolute confidence.

"I shall do my best, Mr. Purdie. You—you have rejuvenated me."

Purdie added a few curt words:

"Concentrate on your designs. For the moment nothing else matters. You can work here quietly without much interruption from the bell."

"That is true," murmured Issell.

He hesitated, rubbing his thin hands nervously. He wished to speak about Miranda. At the same time he was sensible that service seemed to agree with her. The child looked healthier and happier. Purdie may have designed his thoughts. He changed the subject abruptly, introducing the Sage's pet theme.

"This notion of yours, Mr. Issell, about the preconceived idea has interested me. I am following it up along lines of my own."

"Really?"

"I expect comical developments if your theories hold water. I share your views. The preconceived idea runs amok amongst us."

The Sage rose to the fly. He talked amusingly till the young people came in.

III

It had been arranged between Purdie and Ralph that the Captain should speak to Prospero after tea. Purdie would carry off Miranda. This was brought about easily enough by Purdie in his direct fashion.

"I want to make your better acquaintance, Miss Issell. Will you walk as far as the pier and back with me?"

"Of course I will," said Miranda.

Her father looked slightly astonished, but he supposed that Purdie wished to give himself the pleasure of telling the child how he proposed to help her daddy. So he said pleasantly:

"She will be delighted."

Purdie glanced at her demure face, faintly flushed, noting the resolute lips and firm chin. He was not quite at ease with her, and yet curiously aware that she was at ease with him. Probably Ralph had reassured her, imposing on her faith in his friend.

He said, with no beating of bushes:

"You know, Miss Issell, that I know nearly everything."

She replied calmly:

"Ralph told me that you knew everything. Your kindness to my father and me is wonderful."

"Please don't thank me yet. I have not told Ralph what I am doing to help you two. I cannot tell you. If I did, I should be making things harder instead of easier for you."

She nodded, meeting his keen glance, raising intelli-

gent hazel eyes to his. Obviously, like her father, she trusted him whole-heartedly.

"You can help me by doing what I shall ask you to do. I am not asking much, but I can't impress upon you too strongly that such success as may be achieved depends now more upon you than upon me. You are playing a part, aren't you, as parlourmaid to Mrs. Merrytree?"

"In a sort of way, yes."

"I want you to go on playing it."

"I don't quite understand."

"Mrs. Merrytree regards you as a mystery, so Ralph tells me. Remain a mystery. Evade all questions, whatever they may be—*whatever they may be.*"

"She knows that my father's name is not Wensdy."

He said roughly:

"You have told her that his name is Issell?"

"No."

"Thank the Lord!" exclaimed Purdie. "You scared me stiff. I thought the game was up before it had begun."

"Game?"

"No questions, not one!" He held up his hand. "I look upon life as a game. How did Mrs. Merrytree find out that your father's name is not Wensdy?"

Miranda explained. To her immense surprise, Purdie chuckled, positively rumbling with suppressed laughter. Then, as suddenly, he became serious again, almost minatory:

"We have made a magnificent start. Ariel is with us."

"Ariel?"

"You are Miranda——"

She interrupted quickly.

"I wish you would call me Miranda."

"Bless you! I will. You are Miranda; I think of your father as Prospero, kept out of his rightful dukedom. Ariel, I repeat, is with us. But the tempest is to come."

"Will there be a tempest?" she asked anxiously.

"Let us pray for a tempest in a teapot, with Ariel hovering over it. But you—*you* control the elements. It is vital that Mrs. Merrytree should not find out who your father is. She will leave no stone unturned in her quest of him. Evade, therefore, all her questions, direct and indirect."

"Mrs. Merrytree is a lady."

"She is a woman. As her curiosity concerning you becomes more and more inflamed, as it will, so you must be ever on your guard against it. By doing this we may —I don't say we shall—escape thunders and lightnings—the storm!"

She said quickly, with a little shiver of apprehension:

"You think that Ralph's people won't like me."

"On the contrary, I think they will. Be prepared for their liking and guard against that."

"Guard against that?"

She was breathless with astonishment. He frowned at her, took her arm and pressed it, adding a significant shake.

"No questions! The crisis of this romantic affair will be reached when Ralph's people like you. Then you will be tempted sorely to cease to be a mystery. But a mystery you must remain till I give the word. Is that understood?"

She replied firmly:

"Yes."

"Shake hands on it, Miranda."

They did so. Her hand trembled in his. She whispered confidingly:

"I do so want Ralph's people to like me."

"I predict they will like you."

She eyed him doubtfully.

"As—as a parlourmaid?"

"As a parlourmaid." In a brisk genial voice he struck a new note of interrogation. "And now, my dear little maid, tell me what it feels like to be head over heels in love?"

IV

The Captain, meanwhile, was having a not too pleasant quarter of an hour with Prospero, who refused to believe that his child was what me-an'-Kate called "Marriage-ripe."

Ralph attacked boldly, thereby gaining an initial advantage.

"I love your daughter, Mr. Issell. Will you give her to me?"

"Love my daughter? You hardly know her."

"I love her; and she loves me."

"Loves you? Impossible!"

"I asked her to marry me last Thursday. She accepted me. She wanted to tell you at once, but I begged her to wait till to-day. Purdie knows, nobody else."

Adam Issell stood up. His lips moved, but nothing articulate came from them. In silence he began to pace up and down the studio, absorbing, as best he could, the astonishing truth. The years dropped from him like a

moth-eaten garment. He recalled his wooing of Miranda's mother; he beheld her face, so like Miranda's. What would she say, if she were alive? His own wooing had been tempestuous. In the end, after many buffetings, his wife had left a father, who, from the first, had refused consent to the marriage. The father was a doctor with a diminishing practice in South Kensington. Issell, in fact, had met his wife by chance at the South Kensington Museum. Acquaintance ripened into love. The doctor said bluntly that he would be no party to his daughter marrying out of her class. Perhaps from that moment class distinction became anathema to the designer. The doctor gave himself ridiculous airs, because he happened to be of kin to a baronet who ignored his existence. Finally, when conditions at home became intolerable, the doctor's daughter walked out of her father's house, married Issell, and never saw her father again. He died before Miranda was born, leaving behind him hardly money enough to bury him decently. But the baronet—amazing irony!—attended his funeral.

Ralph remained in his chair. Seeing that Issell was much upset, he lit a cigarette. Presently Issell stood still.

"You say that Mr. Purdie knows. What does he say?"

"He said he didn't think I had it in me."

Prospero smiled almost ducally.

"You mean," he said quietly, "that Mr. Purdie was astonished to learn that you wished to marry a tradesman's daughter. And so am I. I say this for the three of us—we are not snobs. We are all, I hope, honest men. I want to be honest with you. And with myself. What will your people say to this?"

"I—I don't know, Mr. Issell. I am reckoning on Purdie's help. I believe that Miranda has—a—bowled him over too. I was watching his face when he met her. He capitulated."

Prospero, still ducal, remarked derisively:

"I am not insensible to Miranda's charm."

"I should think not," said Ralph warmly. He added boyishly: "I jolly well know that in your eyes, Mr. Issell, it's not a question of whether Miranda is good enough for me. Am I good enough for her? I'm not. Nobody is."

Prospero smiled without any derision. In his more whimsical manner, he continued:

"Miranda is barely twenty. You are twenty-five? Yes. Can you support a wife?"

"Men in my position have done so, on their pay, in India."

"But it would be a struggle?"

"Well, I suppose it would."

"And, knowing this, you would run the risk of disaster, you would imperil the happiness of the girl you love, because she would be miserably unhappy when the inevitable day came."

"The inevitable day?"

"When she fully realised that marriage with you had imposed on you the wear and tear of keeping up appearances upon an insufficient income."

He spoke gently, pensively, recalling his own distracting emotions, long ago, when full knowledge came to him of what his marriage had imposed upon his wife. Love had survived that ordeal. But his wife had died.

Ralph was much impressed. Mrs. Merrytree, Purdie,

and Issell—three persons entirely different in temperament, character and experience—were unanimous upon one point: a hasty marriage might imperil Miranda's happiness.

He remained silent.

"I am positive," Issell went on, "that you will encounter opposition from your parents. It is for you to overcome that, if you can. Miranda is still under age. I like you personally. I will give Miranda to you gladly if she is accepted by your parents. You honour them?"

"I do."

"You can't keep this from them?"

"Not for long, Mr. Issell."

"It seems to me there is nothing more to say. I despise certain conventions, but I don't ignore them. Nor can you. Is Lord Bisterne the head of your family?"

"He is."

"I recall something about him, something I read. He lost his two sons in the War."

"Yes," admitted Ralph. "If he died to-morrow my father would step into his shoes."

"And you are your father's eldest son?"

"His only son."

Adam Issell sighed.

"The situation," he murmured, "is cruelly strained. I can do nothing to relieve it."

"Purdie has had an inspiration."

"Of what nature?"

"He refuses to tell me."

Issell's face brightened.

"Mr. Purdie ought to be inspired, because he inspires

others. For the moment we will leave these grave issues in his hands."

V

Scarcely had they left Moscombe, and as soon as the car was clear of the tramway lines, Ralph said to Purdie:

"What do you think of her, Miles?"

"She is worth fighting for."

"That means a lot from you."

"It does."

Purdie, apparently, was in no mood for talk. He sat, huddled up in his great coat, staring at the dusty road ahead of him. He had travelled many roads and wandered down many paths. He was thinking of the women whom he had met on these high roads and by-paths, contrasting them with Miranda. He recalled one in particular, a laughing minx to whom he, the dealer in prose, had indited sonnets! Looking back, it was incredible that he had done so. She had killed romance in him, the baggage! And she was a servant-maid, and he—a printer's devil!

He had learned about women from her.

Kipling's line haunted him, the pistons of the car seemed to repeat it, hammering it home upon a lacerated memory.

And since, a thousand times, he had told himself that he was a fool to waste thought upon her. Why did Nellie come back to him? The sorry incident—if regarded with any detachment—was an incident, or an accident. They had drifted together, boy and girl; they had parted. He had no reason to reproach himself for his treatment of her. Other men, thousands of them,

were little the worse after a similar experience. Why had it affected him?

She was his first love. That rankled. Was it merely bad luck that he had wasted anything approximating to love on her? Or was there in him that *nostalgie de la boue* which affects, disastrously, some of the strongest of strivers? Her looks had demoralised him. She had shaken her curls daringly in his ugly face, luring him on. At first he had been horribly shy with her, which amused the little devil. He remembered how she had laughed at him when he, a raw boy of nineteen, had asked her to marry him. He left her in a black rage, swearing to himself that he would never speak to her again. But she wanted him. She meant to have him. She confessed as much afterwards. For a year he remained her bond slave. He held desperately to her when he discovered that she was faithless, common as the stairs. Finally, she left him.

What a sordid story!

But, analysing it, he could extract the bitter kernel of truth. He thought her pure; she made him impure. She was just a little animal, a creature of the senses, without sense, without intelligence, without any saving graces save youth and bloom. Purdie was too strong a man to blame her; he blamed himself, cursed himself.

When Nellie left him he became reckless. A sense of shame kept him away from "good" girls. And he wondered cynically whether they were good. He had accepted, somehow, Nellie's convictions about her sex. Nellie talked mockingly of "good" girls, tarring them with her brush. Anyway, all good girls, according to her, were dull. They hadn't snap enough to catch "fun"

on the wing. Luckily for Purdie he was ambitious. His work engrossed him. He came under the influence of a clever man, who pushed him on and up. He became a man's man. Now and again he would return to the mud, always disgusted with himself for doing so, but unable to resist the excitement of fugitive adventures with women unworthy of him.

Had he met such a girl as Miranda——!

That thought gnawed at him, filling him with envy of Ralph sitting beside him, steering the car, surely the luckiest fellow in the world, clean of limb and mind, fit to love and be loved!

Purdie had trained himself to form quick judgments; he believed that he could "size up" any man in a few minutes, and then deal with him. Perhaps he looked first for evidence of will-power. He had discovered will-power in Miranda. Honesty of purpose was not so easily discerned, but it shone conspicuous in Miranda's eyes. In short, he had capitulated at first sight. She was Prospero's daughter.

They passed the Vicarage. Ralph indicated the chimneys and gables peeping through the trees.

"It's a snug harbourage," said Ralph, "but I must rouse my dear out of it."

"Not yet."

"Eh?"

"I want you to leave Miranda where she is."

"Leave her alone, you mean?"

"Nothing of the sort," growled Purdie. Then, swiftly, he cast out his blue devils, turning twinkling eyes upon the young fellow. "Tell me," he commanded, "what ar-

rangements have you made with her, about seeing her, I mean? Confide in me, my Ferdinand."

"Ferdinand?"

"You don't read your Shakespeare?"

"Candidly, I prefer Jorrocks."

"Right! Ferdinand was Miranda's lover. And a bit of a thruster. Billets will not suffice you. I could quote Ferdinand, but I spare you. Are you going to meet her in this enchanted forest?"

"I hope so."

"It's a rare place for lovers."

"I shall be most awfully careful, Miles. You needn't worry."

"I don't."

Ralph glanced at him.

"I thought you would tell me to keep away. It puzzled me a bit why you don't. You said on Thursday that the truth would leak out. You offered to bet about it."

"The bet is open still."

"A level hundred, you said; I'll take you in shillings. A fiver that within a fortnight truth is still at the bottom of the well."

"I bet a fiver that within a fortnight your people will know that you are courting Mrs. Merrytree's parlour-maid on the sly."

"It's a bet, Miles."

"I warned you, didn't I, that I bet on certainties?"

"You did, old chap. I've seen certainties amongst the 'also rans'—dead as mutton. Miranda is adventurous. So am I. We shall meet, and we shan't be caught."

"From my point of view I hope you will."

But Purdie refused to answer eager questions.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCERNING A BOOK-PLATE

I

MIRANDA returned to the Vicarage. The wonderful day was nearly over. She had talked with her father, and, being the man he was, he had imposed no conditions. She knew that he trusted her, seeking her happiness before his own. As soon as they were alone he kissed her, stroking her hair, saying nothing, or next to nothing, but gazing into her clear eyes.

"You do like Ralph, Daddy, don't you?"

"I do, I do. But you are so young, child. And there are difficulties! They may be overcome. We shall see."

Back at the Vicarage, she went to her tiny bedroom and locked the door. From a Dorothy bag she took a small velvet case and opened it.

Her engagement ring!

Upon the Thursday, just before they parted, her lover asked her if she liked turquoise. And she replied that she did, adding shyly: "I shall like what you like." Today he had slipped upon her finger a lovely ring of turquoise and diamonds, which he had bought on the Saturday in Westhampton.

It could only be worn at night.

She put it on the right finger and stared at it. She was "engaged."

Presently she knelt down to repeat her simple prayers, a-quiver with gratitude to Omnipotence, commending to Him two men—lover and friend. Purdie was accepted as friend. He puzzled her; he seemed to dominate her thoughts; but he was "just right." She believed devoutly that Purdie, somehow, would smooth from her path the difficulties at which her father hinted.

Lying in bed, tired, but disinclined to sleep, she remembered what she had said to Purdie, and wondered at his power in inspiring and extracting confidence. She had given him more than a glimpse into her heart. Did he think of her as a "gusher"? When she attempted to reveal her feelings, he had listened in silence, keenly attentive. When she finished her artless recital, he had thanked her soberly. At the very last, as they were entering the studio, he repeated the injunction: "Be on your guard against indiscreet questions. It's nobody's business who your father is. You have assumed a new name; accepted, deliberately, a new part. Play that part for all you're worth!"

Very soon the more masterful personality drifted out of her mind. She fell asleep, thinking of her lover. She dreamed of him

II

Mrs. Merrytree lay awake too, tingling with excitement and curiosity. It would be unjust to call her a snob, but she happened to be the daughter of a man who was Briton enough to love a lord. Even to Mrs. Merrytree a belted earl was not quite as other men. She could not help investing a "nobleman of ancient lineage" with a halo of respect and admiration; she felt uneasy at the mere thought of the daughter of such a man

polishing her silver and cleaning the Vicar's old coats. The world, since the War, might be upside down—no doubt it was—but there must be limits even to Topsy-turvydom.

The weekly illustrated paper had been sent to her unmarked—not an unusual experience. Kind friends sent such papers from time to time. For example, the daughters of the local magnate never forgot an old friend deeply interested in their doings in the great world. If they happened to be "snapped" at society functions, one of them would send *The Prattler* or *The Cackler*. She had searched the paper that arrived by post on Sunday morning, reasonably sure that she would find mention of Nancy or Celia. And she had found, instead, the astounding paragraph; nothing else likely to challenge attention.

Had the paper been sent with a definite object? And, if so, by whom? And why?

At the cold supper provided upon Sunday evenings she had shown the paragraph to the Vicar, who remained, after reading it, exasperatingly calm. He did not leap to hasty conclusions. He might rush wildly after some rare specimen of a fritillary, but, mentally, he ambled behind his active-minded wife.

"A mere coincidence," he murmured.

"You admit that Mary is a mystery, Alfred?"

"So are you, my dear; so are all women."

"Why was this paper sent to me?"

"I don't know." Nevertheless, after a pause, he added mildly:

"It seems to me, Annabella, that this is none of our business. You are slightly excited. You might, I hesi-

tate to say so, make yourself ridiculous over this matter. I do accept Mary as above her present condition. But many young ladies have been forced to seek domestic service. We are lucky to get her. I hope we shall keep her."

"Surely you admit that the daughter of a nobleman is out of place in our pantry?"

"I cannot accept Mary, upon such slight evidence, as the daughter of a nobleman. Is this cheese Cheshire?"

Mrs. Merrytree was silenced—for the moment only.

On the Monday morning Mary resumed her duties. So did Mrs. Merrytree. Being an excellent housewife, she observed self-imposed rules. On Monday she inspected her maids' bedrooms. She insisted that they should be kept in order. She walked briskly into Mary's room at a time when Mary was busy in the pantry.

We may be reasonably sure that her eyes, as she entered that virginal sanctuary, were slightly more alert than usual. She gazed with approval at a neat bed. Thence her glance wandered to the washstand. Mary, she reflected, used a nice sponge and a face sponge. She lifted the cover of the soap dish. She saw a square of plain soap provided by herself, and a tiny cake of heliotrope-coloured soap, which she examined with greater interest. It had a delicate fragrance of lilac.

"I believe," thought Mrs. Merrytree, "that it is Roger and Gallet."

The dressing-table told another story to a woman capable of drawing inferences. Hairbrushes and comb were in order. Inevitably Mrs. Merrytree compared these articles of the toilet with what belonged to me-an'-Kate, who were not fastidious about hairbrushes or

combs. She remarked a pair of nail-scissors and a shoe-horn. Under the dressing-table were shoes—in trees! Me-an'-Kate bought scent with a basis of musk. Mary, apparently, used no scent.

Mrs. Merrytree was about to leave the room, rather regretfully, and wondering, in spite of herself, what a neat trunk might contain, when her roving eye fell upon two books upon a table near Mary's bed. One was a small Bible; the other was delicately bound in very old tooled morocco.

She picked up the *Lyra Innocentium.*

The Sage, as has been said, was a collector of books picked up for a few pence at second-hand bookstalls. Some of these books held book-plates. The Sage respected book-plates. He had found this copy of the *Lyra Innocentium* in Oxford Street. He had paid ten shillings for it, because he wished to give a girl of fourteen a birthday present. In it was a book-plate, a coat-of-arms surmounted by a coronet. It was not, however, an earl's coronet. Coincidence, possibly, shrinks from too flagrant a violation of the laws of probability. Above the book-plate, in his scholarly handwriting, the Sage had inscribed this line: "To my dear little daughter from her loving father."

Mrs. Merrytree beheld the coronet, read the inscription, and replaced the book. Then, hurriedly, she sought the seclusion of her bedchamber.

Confirmation "strong as Holy Writ" was an inalienable possession.

III

She was now convinced that she was entertaining, and fully aware of it, the angel daughter of an eccentric

nobleman. Unfortunately for her, she knew nothing of heraldry. But she did know that coats-of-arms were set forth in Burke's Peerage and Baronetage. With ample time at her disposal, she might have found the coat in the *Lyra Innocentium* and collated the book-plate with the coats-of-arms emblazoned in Burke. With patience she might have arrived at an answer to the insistent question: "Who is Mary's father?" Had she done so, however, she would have identified the coat as belonging to a Baron of the United Kingdom; barren, indeed, of lands and honours, and barren, too, so far as the issue of his person was concerned. Mrs. Merrytree resisted this temptation with a conscience already not quite easy. Mary, pretty dear, had beseeched her to ask no more questions. And she had nodded. The nod pledged her—up to a point. She was sensible that she could not bring herself to put further questions to Mary. She had slightly soiled clean hands by picking up the *Lyra Innocentium* and opening it. She shrank from telling her husband that she had done so.

Harassed by these prickings of conscience, she remembered the Somervells, of whom she had spoken not too kindly. Ralph's visit had pleased her. She would have preferred to take counsel with the village magnate's wife, but the lady, who knew many lords, was in London. The Somervells were of kin to a peer. Colonel Somervell, a gentleman of the old school, might identify a coat with three stars upon it on one side and some bars on the other. She thought that she could describe it to him, if necessary. Mrs. Somervell, not a gossip, would offer advice and a cup of China tea.

She drove a small pony cart to Chorley House.

Much to her satisfaction the Colonel and Mrs. Somervell were "at home." Ralph and Purdie were out walking in the Forest, but expected back to tea.

Alone with her host and hostess, comfortably ensconced in a chair under the lime trees, Mrs. Merrytree said solemnly:

"A most extraordinary thing has happened."

"Really?"

"I have a new parlourmaid, a girl of surprising charm and intelligence, who is, I am certain, the daughter of a nobleman."

"Most extraordinary, as you say," murmured Mrs. Somervell.

Mrs. Merrytree, delighted to perceive that she had, in stage parlance, "got over," held the situation firmly.

"Ralph came to see me, dear boy, the other day. He was struck by Mary's appearance—her name is Mary—did he say anything to you about her?"

"Not a word."

"I can assure you of this: everybody who has seen Mary is struck by her manner, by her—a—distinction. That is the word."

"Distinction?" repeated Colonel Somervell.

Like the Vicar, he remained calm, suspending judgment.

Mrs. Merrytree told her tale, and told it with cumulative intensity of interest, well aware that she had the ear of her audience. When she mentioned the book-plate, Colonel Somervell asked questions.

"Not stars, my dear lady; mullets. Three mullets on what?"

"On the book-plate."

"On what field?"

"Field! I don't think there was a field."

The Colonel was patient and explanatory. Mrs. Merrytree, in her own way, remembered what she had seen. The Colonel became excited over mullets, a chevron, tinctures and ordinaries—all so much Choctaw to Mrs. Merrytree.

"I must see it," declared the Colonel. "But I agree. The affair is extraordinary. Who could have sent you this weekly newspaper? Obviously, somebody wished to call your attention to that paragraph. Upon my word, I should like to see the girl."

"So should I," admitted Mrs. Somervell.

"That can be arranged easily, if you will drink tea with me any afternoon except Thursday. Thursday is Mary's day off. I have asked no questions, but I am sure she goes to Cronmouth. Her father is probably staying at Cronmouth."

"He may not belong to this county," said the Colonel.

"Being eccentric, as Mary admits to me that he is, he may like Cronmouth," suggested Mrs. Merrytree.

The Colonel and his lady admitted this.

"I shall not talk of this to my other neighbours, dear Mrs. Somervell. But, do tell me, what would you do under the circumstances?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Somervell.

"But the situation is—awkward?"

She spoke interrogatively. The fact that such people as the Somervells accepted the romantic tale impressed her tremendously, rehabilitating faith in her own judgment. But the Colonel kept on repeating:

"I must see the girl. Distinction—now. I flatter my-

self that I know distinction when I meet it. I seldom meet it. The young girls of to-day have not distinction. I can detect quality, even if I find it under the apron of a parlourmaid."

"Will you come to me on Wednesday afternoon?"

"We will," said Colonel Somervell. "Thursday is her 'day off,' is it?"

"Yes; it pains me to use such an expression about the daughter of a nobleman of ancient lineage."

"If one could follow the girl——!"

Mrs. Somervell was shocked.

"My dear Arthur——!"

"Well, well, the affair is exciting."

"Isn't it? She trees her shoes. And those handkerchiefs——!"

"The book-plate," declared the Colonel solemnly, "clinches the matter. And her blushing admission to you that her name is not Wensdy. The father must be mad."

"But not impoverished. The paragraph mentioned that."

"Yes; and conditions in this unhappy country are so intolerable that there is excuse for madness. At moments I feel mad myself. With our present misgovernment, my little Ruth may become a parlourmaid."

Mrs. Merrytree turned again to her hostess:

"I don't quite know how to treat her?"

Mrs. Somervell replied gently:

"I am sure that you are treating her admirably. You will excite gossip, you will upset the other maids, you will upset the girl herself, if you attempt to lighten her duties."

"That is perfectly true."

"Leave things as they are."

"I will."

None the less they talked about "Mary" till Purdie and Ralph appeared. Then, abruptly, the fascinating subject was dropped.

IV

In the presence of Purdie no mention was made of Mary. And, soon after tea, Mrs. Merrytree drove away from Chorley House. Not till after dinner, when the ladies had left the dining-room, and the three men were alone over their wine did the Colonel burst forth:

"The inaccuracy of women is the devil! One expects ignorance but not inaccuracy."

"What has happened, Father?" asked Ralph.

"This afternoon, just before tea-time, Mrs. Merrytree told your dear mother and me an amazing tale. Her parlourmaid, so it seems, is——" He broke off suddenly, staring at his son. "You have met her. You called upon the old lady. What did you think of Mary, the new parlourmaid?"

Purdie's face remained inscrutable. Ralph, taken aback, but keeping his head, said quickly:

"Yes; I saw her. She's a wonder."

"A wonder—hay? Mrs. Merrytree has found out who she is."

Ralph gulped down some wine. The Colonel, too excited to remark his son's slight confusion, went on: "The daughter of a nobleman of ancient lineage——!"

"Very remarkable," observed Purdie.

"Regular knockout," murmured Ralph.

The Colonel told Mrs. Merrytree's tale, ending explosively: "The book-plate proves it. Since tea, I have

spent a couple of hours, and neglected my correspondence, in running through the peerage. The silly old woman described to me an escutcheon. She spoke of stars, but damn my stars if she don't deserve stripes. I suppose she meant mullets. But she may have confounded mullets with crosses, roses, saltires or roundels. God only knows! She chattered, too, about 'bars.' She ought to be put behind 'em. She seemed pretty confident about a chevron. Anyway, I've wasted two hours, and I'm no wiser than I was before. If I could see that book-plate——! However, you, Ralph, confirm what Mrs. Merrytree tells us about the girl. She is, you say, a wonder. The old lady used the word—distinction."

"She is distinguished, Father. She looks and speaks like a charming young lady."

"You don't say so. On Wednesday, I am to judge for myself. But why was *The Prattler,* containing this significant paragraph, sent to Mrs. Merrytree?"

Ralph glanced at Purdie. He knew that Purdie had an interest in *The Prattler.* Purdie's face remained impassive, but he said carelessly:

"This story is hardly credible. It looks to me as if Mrs. Merrytree had been spoofed."

"No, Purdie, no. Mrs. Merrytree may be a fool about heraldry, not about parlourmaids. We are faced with a very pretty mystery."

"Very pretty indeed," admitted Ralph.

Purdie thrust out his jaw, grinning derisively.

"Mrs. Merrytree has discovered a mare's nest."

"Nothing of the sort," affirmed the Colonel testily. "But, mark you, I reserve my opinion till Wednesday. I shall see this charming young lady. I mean to have a

word with her. She can't take me in. Breeding is unmistakable. If her heels are hairy, I shall know it."

"Her heels are not hairy, Father."

The Colonel finished his wine.

"I have advised Mrs. Merrytree," he said with finality, "to hold her tongue for a few days. She asked us for —a—advice. She interested us. I have promised to help her. . . ."

"Forgive me," interrupted Purdie, "but, really, is it fair on the girl? Why should Mrs. Merrytree care tuppence, provided the girl does her work decently, whether she is the daughter of a nobleman or not?"

"If you can't answer that question for yourself, Purdie, I'm afraid I can't help you. Things have come to a pass indeed when earls' daughters become parlour-maids."

"I refuse to believe she is an earl's daughter."

The Colonel rose, slightly huffed.

"That's as may be. Nowadays, I am prepared for anything."

V

The Somervells, father, mother and daughter, went early to bed. Ralph smoked a pipe with Purdie. The young fellow believed that he had made four out of two and two. As soon as he was alone with his friend, he said eagerly:

"Miles, you sent that 'par' to *The Prattler*. You wrote two letters on Thursday night and posted them yourself. This mare's nest is of your building, isn't it?"

Purdie frowned at him.

"You butt in, do you? All right! Yes; I inspired that paragraph. And the imps of comedy, or perhaps Master

Ariel, prearranged that book-plate as corroborative detail."

"I'm not quite there yet."

"I'm testing this preconceived idea of Prospero's. Things are working out even better than I had anticipated. You may have noticed that I slightly annoyed your father to-night. The preconceived idea thrives the more lustily if you fertilise it with a dash of opposition. He is ready to believe that Miranda is the daughter of a belted earl. When he meets her next Wednesday, he'll be cocksure of it."

"I dare say, and perfectly furious when he discovers the truth. I don't think much of your scheme, Miles."

"You ungrateful young rascal! How I hate dotting my i's! However——!"

Purdie got up out of his armchair, filled himself a whisky and soda and returned, glass in hand, standing over Ralph, looking down upon him with smiling eyes.

"Look you here, Ralph, your scheme was rotten. I'll hark back a bit, set me right if I go wrong. You were sharp enough to see that Issell's designs were superlatively good. That jumps even to the untrained eye. I will bet more than I can afford to lose that Issell's designs are well known in this country and America, but not under his name. That remains to be verified. We come now to Miranda. You fell in love with the little witch and I don't blame you. I—I envy you. She is Issell's masterpiece. Then you thought that I might boom Issell. And I hope to do so. You told me yourself that if he was accepted by the world as a famous designer, and if, later on you introduced your people to Miranda, they might welcome her as daughter-in-law. I emphasise—*might*."

"And what is rotten about that?"

"Just this. Sooner or later your people would discover that you knew Miranda when she was merely the daughter of a tradesman in Moscombe. They would realise that they had been deceived by you. They would believe that Miranda was a party to the deceit. They would then be furious—and quite right, too."

"I see," said Ralph humbly.

"Inspiration came to me from Adam Issell. I saw that it was vital that your people should see Miranda as a parlourmaid, admit her quality, her distinction. I wanted them to consent to your marrying her as a parlourmaid. If they met her with the preconceived idea that she was a wonder, they would say so ungrudgingly. And having said so they would find it difficult to unsay it. The problem was, and is, to present Miranda to them as somebody eligible to become your wife. Accordingly, I wrote that 'par,' and I sent a copy of *The Prattler* to Mrs. Merrytree. Ariel has done the rest. Now, I wanted to keep you and Miranda out of this, as innocent of my machinations as the Babes in the Wood. I belong to the great army of the 'Don't-care-damns.' I shan't worry when your good father discovers that I have spoofed him. But, if he is spoofed by me, if he is captivated by Miranda, if he chortles over the possibility of your marrying such a paragon, how can he back down when he discovers that she is Issell's daughter?"

"You are a marvel," admitted Ralph.

"I advise you, my boy, to let me play this hand alone without further interference or comment. Make love to Miranda! Go it! The harder you go it, the sooner the climax will take place. No more questions!"

Purdie sat down and drank his whisky and soda.

CHAPTER IX

THE COLONEL SURRENDERS

I

UPON the following Wednesday Colonel and Mrs. Somervell motored over to Medbery-Hawthorne. Neither Ralph nor Purdie accompanied them. The Colonel secretly cherished a tiny grievance against Purdie. His liking for the war correspondent had increased upon better acquaintance. Purdie made him laugh; Purdie was helpful in small matters of business; he had, in fact, a "grasp." The Colonel, confronted by post-war conditions beyond his ken, turned to Purdie instinctively, as a lame man might reach a stout stick. With Purdie, arm in arm, he hobbled slowly towards a better understanding of what the journalist termed "reconstruction." The Colonel's criticism of heart-breaking changes even in Puddenhurst was mainly destructive. In a dim fashion, he was beginning to see something, not much, through Purdie's spectacles. And, as a lover and connoisseur of horses, he set a high value on "bone." Purdie, he admitted, had the bone necessary to carry him far on any road. He was a "stayer." And he had "manners." By manners, the Colonel meant—what every horseman appreciates—steadiness, a good mouth, no prancings and fidgetings. He liked men who would listen quietly to him when he talked. Then, in his turn, he would listen to them,

affecting a courtesy which he might be far from feeling.

Nevertheless—as he told his wife, who rarely contradicted him—Purdie, all said and done, was "not out of the top drawer." A man of the world could detect *that* in ha'penny matters, the unconsidered trifles that mean so much to the prescient eye. For instance, it was quite impossible for Purdie, with his upbringing (the Colonel remained hazy about printer's devils), to understand the appalling significance of a nobleman's daughter accepting cheerfully the ignominies of domestic service. The mere suggestion of such an inversion of the decencies and right adjustments of life raised a lump in Colonel Somervell's gorge. He thought better of Mrs. Merrytree, because she was distressed and perplexed by a situation so delicate and so embarrassing. He wondered why his own dear wife was not more moved by the exigency. But she, alas! was physically frail, unable to cope with the overdressed minxes in her service. He could make allowance for her.

By this time, after forty-eight hours' reflection, the Colonel had brought himself to accept an unvarnished tale as true. The expression "mare's nest" had provoked him. The thinly veiled injunction from Purdie that the matter was nobody's concern rankled. On the Tuesday he bought the current *Prattler* and read, alone in his den, growling audibly, the devastating paragraph.

"What does pretty Lady M. say about it?"

What indeed?

He intended to have a word with pretty Lady M.

Perhaps his son was responsible for this acceptance of the amazing story. Ralph had pronounced the new parlourmaid to be a "wonder." Had the boy ever used

such extravagant praise about Alice Apperton? Never! Or about any other nice girl in the Forest of Ys? No. In a jiffy, his boy, a chip of the old block, had looked beneath a parlourmaid's pinafore and appraised what he found without hesitation. Father and son could "look over" horses out at grass, ungroomed, unkempt, thin or fat, and recognise breeding and quality. That might be a gift. The Somervells had it.

Moreover, he had taken Ralph aside and cross-examined him.

"What d'ye mean by a wonder—hay?"

For the second time Ralph salved a sensitive conscience by telling the exact truth.

"She opened the door, Father, and I gasped."

"You don't say so? You—you gasped——!"

"Yes; I behaved like a clown. I—I just stared at her, dumb with astonishment."

"Bless my soul! What hit you in the eyes, my boy? Beauty? The little filly's good breeding—the points we both admire, and very properly? Throw your tongue, Ralph!"

In the Forest of Ys, followers of the chase are dependent upon hounds who "throw their tongue." Not hearing that "music," they don't quite know "where they are."

Ralph, thus adjured, spoke up and out:

"She isn't a beauty, Father. Nothing *flashy*, you know."

"Damn flashiness! A flashy chestnut mare nearly broke my neck. Not a beauty, eh?"

"Clean limbed, Father; nice sloping shoulder; carries

a high head, intelligent eye; moves daintily; picks up her feet—small feet, b'Jove! good all round."

The Colonel nodded solemnly.

"In the Stud Book, what?"

"I can't say that," said Ralph cautiously.

"Well, well, who can till you see the entry in black and white? You have told me quite enough. And, anyway, I form my own judgments of horses and women."

Fortified by this talk, the Colonel, without mentioning the fact even to his wife, devoted more valuable time to Burke. It is affirmed that a man can find anything, anywhere, if he searches for it diligently. In the works of William Shakespeare wise men have found—or thought they did—proof positive that the Swan of Avon was not the author of the plays attributed to him. In the same earnest spirit the Colonel turned over again the pages of Sir Bernard Burke.

He discovered a belted earl with a daughter named Mary. Nothing extraordinary about that. Many earls have named their daughters Mary. But, to his joy, he discovered also a coat-of-arms bearing mullets. Ariel must have been laughing in his sleeve! The earl in question was not known to Colonel Somervell, but he might be eccentric. Unless he had mortgaged three places up to the hilt, he must be rich. If he were rich and sent his daughter out to service, he must be eccentric. So the Colonel reasoned, smoking a cigar that was not worth the price paid for it. He kept what he found in Burke to himself, for a reason which illuminates further his character. He dreaded ridicule. If that fellow Purdie was right, if the whole thing was jiggery-pokery, the truth, when it came out, should not find Colonel Somervell in

an untenable position. Earl's daughter or no earl's daughter, he proposed to judge the girl with real detachment on her "points." If some indiscreet person had dared to suggest to him that he was carrying to Medbery-Hawthorne a preconceived idea, he would have repudiated such a suggestion with scorn. But, in his heart, he had "reconstructed" a plausible working hypothesis. And he had done so, subconsciously, under the guiding intelligence of Purdie. Mrs. Paxton—according to Mrs. Merrytree a decayed gentlewoman who kept a registry office—refused, on formal application, to furnish information concerning Mary Wensdy, a parlourmaid supplied by her. Why? Her silence, her refusal to answer a simple question, became at once portentously mysterious. Almost immediately it is discovered that the girl has assumed the absurd patronymic of Wensdy. She is sailing blithely under false colours. She possesses cambric handkerchiefs with a "M" encircled by a hand-embroidered wreath. Her appearance, her voice and manners, are those of a young lady. She admits that her father is eccentric. In her possession is a book exquisitely bound, with a book-plate in it surmounted by a coronet, and an inscription. The book is a birthday gift from father to daughter. Lastly, when Mary has her "day off," she takes the Cronmouth road. Cronmouth was not to Colonel Somervell's taste, but belted earls patronised excellent hotels. Given an eccentric nobleman, with preposterous notions about the dignity of "service"; given, also, that however eccentric he might be, such a dangerous experiment as sending your girl from you as a parlourmaid would hardly be tried in your own county and amongst people who would recognise the

girl at once, it was conceivable, nay, it was certain that the maddest of altruists would select a locality where neither he nor his daughter would be known, and, further, a locality where the father, seeking his ease at his inn, might watch with paternal solicitude the effect of his daring adventure.

With these conclusions simmering in his mind, Colonel Somervell drove his car to Medbery-Hawthorne.

II

Mrs. Merrytree made preparations to receive her visitors. Mary was instructed to wear the cinnamon-brown livery and her prettiest cap and apron.

"I am expecting Colonel and Mrs. Somervell to tea. They will arrive after four. The weather is so fine that we can have tea on the lawn."

"Very good, m'm," replied Mary.

Her pulses throbbed at the dear name, but, outwardly, she remained calm. In a soft voice that may have faltered ever so slightly she asked: "Are you expecting more than two, m'm?"

"Only two, Mary; but we must have a dainty tea and some fruit. The nectarines and peaches sent so kindly from Medbery Court. The Vicar will not be at home."

"Very good, m'm."

She flitted away, light as a bird. Mrs. Merrytree regarded her as a bird of exotic plumage; a bird belonging to a paradise into which a solicitor's daughter rarely strayed. Not to betray herself, when Mary waited upon her, became a task of ever-increasing magnitude.

That same morning a small incident had upset her. She was aware that she had not described the coat-of-

arms correctly to Colonel Somervell. Before he arrived, she decided that it would be permissible to attempt a rough sketch in pencil. She resolved to do this after many heartburnings and without consulting the Vicar. She had an uneasy premonition that Alfred would say quietly: "This is not quite cricket, Annabella." On the other hand, Colonel Somervell would ask for exact information. He had hinted as much. Indeed, a new and consoling consideration presented itself. Was she not justified in unveiling the mystery if Chance, not Design, furnished the opportunity? Mary had elected to come to her as a parlourmaid—incognita. To take advantage of her position as mistress, to play Torquemada in petticoats, was unthinkable for good Mrs. Merrytree. But, if the girl dropped handkerchiefs, why shouldn't her mistress pick them up? If she left books upon the table near her bed, might not any self-respecting person glance at them? Even Colonel Somervell, who might be a peer of the realm some day, had said: "If we could follow the girl——!" That had sunk in. Under certain conditions it was the duty of a matron to follow a maid.

To Mrs. Merrytree's chagrin and disappointment the *Lyra Innocentium* was not to be found in Mary's bedroom. It is impossible to conjecture what Mrs. Merrytree would have done had Ariel, for instance, whispered to her where the volume was. Mary had sent it to her lover. She had little to offer in return for the ring, so she had sent her most precious possession.

I give you (she wrote) my own little book that Daddy gave to me when I was fourteen. It is really part of me. I wear my lovely ring at night. I shall think to-night of you reading my book, holding it in your mind. There is a horrid stain on

page 91. I made the dreadful mistake of trying to learn some verses when I was eating raspberries. . . .

A fond lover had kissed the stain.

Finding the book gone, Mrs. Merrytree almost strained herself leaping to another hasty conclusion. Mary, of course, an alert girl, had remembered the truth-revealing book-plate. She had locked up this bit of evidence in her neat trunk.

At four-fifteen the Somervells arrived.

The Colonel brought the car to a standstill handsomely just in front of the door, very pleased with himself, inasmuch as the Vicarage drive had been laid out upon modest lines to accommodate pony carts. He got out briskly, removed a rug from his wife, helped her to descend, and rang the bell.

Mary opened the door.

In one second, so far as the Colonel was concerned, the essential truth became established. His boy had been right. Whether he would have touched this high-water mark of conviction if he had not accepted as authentic Mrs. Merrytree's tale about a nobleman is of no importance.

The girl was—distinguished.

And she occupied an unassailable position in the Stud Book. He became ridiculously eager to talk to her.

"Mrs. Merrytree is at home?" he asked perfunctorily.

"Yes, sir. She is expecting you and Mrs. Somervell."

The honoured name left her lips delightfully.

Miranda Somervell!

Any mispronunciation of his name irritated the Colonel. Even in the Forest of Ys residents who ought

to have known better called him Somerville, and tradesmen, reaching nether hell, distorted the name into Somervul.

She had the clear articulation of the gentlewoman. He smiled at her so pleasantly that she blushed, not in rustic colourings of peony and rhododendron, but exquisitely pink.

"Mrs. Merrytree is in the garden, sir."

"One moment." He nearly added "my dear."

Mary stood still, three steps above the veteran.

"Shall I leave the car here?" he asked.

Mary glanced at it. The car was of pre-war manufacture, but the Colonel had had it varnished recently.

"It would be wise," she suggested, "to leave it in the shade."

She indicated, with a small uplifted hand, a generous patch of shadow.

"You can follow us into the garden, Arthur," said Mrs. Somervell.

"Certainly, my dear."

Mary and Mrs. Somervell vanished. The Colonel wiped his brow with a silk bandana.

"A dear and a sweet," he muttered to himself; "whoever she is—whoever she is."

The car was carefully backed into the shade.

"And sensible! Knows about cars. Saw that my car had just been done up. Uses her eyes."

With these phrases on the lips of his mind, he passed through the hall and on to the lawn beyond.

As he approached Mrs. Merrytree, Mary flitted by him. "A good mover," he thought. His hostess greeted him cordially, and he noted that she was excited. The three

sat down. Knowing that her parlourmaid would appear shortly with the tea things, Mrs. Merrytree said in a stage whisper:

"I have something to tell you."

Mrs. Somervell murmured:

"I saw that you were impressed, Arthur."

"Yes, yes; I own up. You are right, Mrs. Merrytree, the girl has—distinction."

The Vicar's wife went on, with slight nervousness:

"I'm afraid that I described that book-plate very badly. And you were so interested, Colonel, that I thought I would attempt a pencil sketch of it."

"Very sound—very sound!"

"But," she glanced about her, almost furtively, "when I looked for the book, I couldn't find it."

"She had hidden it," exclaimed the Colonel.

"That was my first impression. But, on second thoughts, there seemed a chance that I might be mistaken. Mary, I reflected, might have taken the book to her pantry. I—I could not search the pantry for it."

"Certainly not."

"And I hated to disappoint you."

"Quite. I want to see that book-plate. Show me that book-plate and within a few hours, perhaps sooner, I'll tell you who Mary's father is."

"I thought of all that. And so I—I screwed up my courage after luncheon and said lightly to Mary, as if the matter was of no importance: 'You have a copy of the *Lyra Innocentium;* will you lend it to me?' "

"A happy thought, Mrs. Merrytree, happily conceived, happily carried out."

"Thank you. I explained to Mary that long ago I

owned a copy, had mislaid it, and wished to refresh my memory by glancing at it again."

The Colonel replied with enthusiasm:

"I couldn't have managed the matter better myself. She has lent you the book?"

"No. She seemed, I fancied, rather confused, but her manners were perfect. She expressed regret at not being able to oblige me. The little volume, so she added, had been sent away."

"A fib," exclaimed the Colonel, "a fib."

"I fear so."

"I don't blame her, not I. She had to fib. She discovered, of course, that the book-plate was compromising. The book is safely locked up in her trunk."

"That is my opinion also."

"If it isn't," continued the Colonel, now thoroughly enjoying himself, "if she hasn't fibbed, it makes no difference. Quite possibly she has sent the book to her father. Whether she has hid it or whether she has sent it away, we know now the truth. She is endeavouring to hide it."

"Yes."

The Colonel laughed gaily.

"I cast curiosity from me, Mrs. Merrytree."

"But it returns, Colonel Somervell."

"I am serious. We don't know who Mary's father is. For my part, I am convinced that she is the daughter of some eccentric peer. I shan't try to discover him."

"You give me my cue, Colonel."

"Why? I ask you—why? Because, sooner or later, Mary herself will reveal the little secret. I am interested in Mary."

Mrs. Somervell observed gently:

"Men, even the best of them, are so taken by appearances."

"I am taken with Mary's appearance," admitted the veteran. "And I intend to have a word with her."

"My dear Arthur, you can't have more than a formal word with Mrs. Merrytree's parlourmaid. You have had that already."

But the Colonel was a man of resource. He had made his plans, the old campaigner. He said incisively:

"My dear, I am quite sure that Mrs. Merrytree will wish to show you her roses. And you want to see them."

"I do, Arthur."

"Good! I am not vitally interested in roses. After tea, I propose to smoke a cigarette. Our hostess will take you to her rose garden. Mary will clear away. I shall engage her in talk."

"Nothing could be simpler," murmured Mrs. Merrytree. "And here she comes!"

III

A substantial tea was provided by Mrs. Merrytree. The Colonel, out of the corner of his eye, watched Mary as she spread the cloth and arranged upon it the tea equipage and the post-war delicacies. The preconceived idea that "race" is indicated by ends rather than by means obsessed the Colonel as he commended to himself Mary's hands and feet. More, it was obvious to him that only a young lady of "breeding" could accept so naturally an absurdly subordinate position in the house of a solicitor's daughter. Sure of herself—how much that meant!—Mary carried the badges of a temporary servitude with

an "air" deliciously pure and refreshing. He had, indeed, a vision of princesses floating out of the mediæval past and bending low their proud heads to wash the feet of vagabond pilgrims!

"She stoops to conquer," he thought.

She had conquered—*HIM!*

Ariel, whom we may conceive as "stage-managing" the situation, must have been shaken with inextinguishable laughter.

Presently, Mrs. Merrytree led Mrs. Somervell into the rose-garden. The Colonel lighted a small cigar. The final test remained to be applied. If Mary exhibited base-born pruderies and awkwardness when he spoke to her, he would have to modify his conclusions.

She approached.

It is likely that Miranda hoped that her Ralph's father would speak to her. If he did, she must endeavour to please him. The few words already exchanged had banished preconceived ideas of a stern, uncompromising Roman father. Intuition whispered to the maid that the old soldier was well-disposed towards her. He had smiled genially at her. And she was accustomed to the smiles of her father's friends.

In silence, she began to clear away.

"This is your first place, so your mistress tells me."

"Yes, sir."

As he spoke she stood gravely at attention.

"And how do you like it?"

"I am very happy here, sir."

"Um! I wish that our maids were happy. They complain that Chorley, where I live, is dull. You—you have an urban look."

This was very clever of the Colonel. "Urban" happened to be a word not often found in the vocabulary of parlourmaids. If she stared at him and said "Pardon" he would be disillusioned. To his immense satisfaction, she replied quickly:

"Urban? I'm glad you don't say 'suburban.'"

The Colonel, so far as this special mission was concerned, might then and there have returned to Chorley House. He nailed to the mast his conviction that "pretty Lady M." might have come from Grosvenor Square, but not, not out of a mare's nest. Had Miranda been older and more experienced, she might have divined from his instant change of manner that Ralph's father accepted her as an equal. He laughed, throwing back a handsome head.

"Suburban——! Distinctly *not* suburban. You have no high opinion of Suburbia."

"I hate it," she replied vehemently.

She had forgotten to add "sir."

Much amused, he said quietly:

"Why?"

She quoted the Sage:

"Suburbs are detestable, because they attempt to fuse town and country. What is best in each is lost. A suburb is a wilderness of shams."

The Colonel blinked. Miranda said hastily:

"I beg your pardon, sir. I—I forgot myself."

"Tchah! Go on forgetting yourself. You interest me. I confess that you astonish me. You are a young girl. I didn't expect to find a young girl brimming over with —with—a—theories, cut and dried theories about suburbs."

Miranda brightened again. The smell of the ring—the *pulverem Olympicum*—assailed her nostrils. Instantly, she was transported to the studio, where bearded Bohemians tossed all theories to the winds, laughing at and deriding them.

"My father says: 'God save us from the domination of theories—particularly our own.'"

"Bless my soul! Particularly our own, eh? Your father must be an observer of life."

"He is. Father is far and away the cleverest man I have ever met."

"Is he?"

"Cleverness," continued Miranda, still in the studio, "is ridiculously relative. Father is not at all clever, for instance, about managing his own affairs." The Colonel nodded encouragingly; Miranda hesitated but continued: "I ought to have called him wise. He's a sage. He has studied profoundly what he calls 'The Ethics of the Inanimate.'"

The Colonel began to let his cigar go out. He stared at Miranda so hard that she blushed and became a parlourmaid. She resumed her duties.

"Hold hard!" Again Miranda stood at attention. "What do you mean by the ethics of the inanimate?"

Miranda immediately presented a draft upon her memory, promptly honoured. She was quoting the Sage verbatim. But how could Colonel Somervell guess that?

The ethics of the inanimate impose themselves upon the subjective consciousness."

"Do they? I am still fogged."

"A suburb is a case in point. The cheap, badly built houses, the gimcrack furniture in them, the shops full

of second-rate wares, force themselves upon our notice. We are influenced by what is bad. We come to accept it, perhaps, as good. Father says that he hardly dares to measure the influence of evil exercised by a shop window blazing with cheap trinkets."

The Colonel said heartily:

"About that I see eye to eye with your father, I—I should like to meet him."

But he had gone one step too far upon the alluring road. At once, Miranda became cautious, recalling the admonitions of Purdie.

"Perhaps you will, sir, some day. Father has buried himself amongst his books."

The Colonel's now inflamed imagination beheld a sage in a magnificent library, poring over quartos and folios, studying the ethics of the inanimate, lost, hopelessly lost, to any reasonable consideration of the claims of the animate as embodied in a charming and intelligent child. At that moment he felt paternal towards Miranda. He burned to rescue pretty Lady M. Apparently, with all her remarkable qualities, she was unable to rescue herself. He said gallantly:

"I admit that I am interested profoundly in the animate. I prefer their ethics."

Miranda replied primly:

"Yes, sir."

She cleared away the tea things, and vanished.

IV

The Colonel, on his way home, tried to repeat, and not too accurately, what had passed between himself and Miranda. The car exacted attention and the surface of

the road happened to be bad, another post-war grievance. Nevertheless, he managed to astonish his wife, who agreed mildly that Mrs. Merrytree's parlourmaid was, as her dear boy said, "a wonder."

By the time they reached home, "pretty Lady M." had bloomed and blossomed into a personality. She simply filled the Colonel's not too capacious mind. He said with finality:

"We must get her out of that."

"How, my dear Arthur?"

"You leave that to me. I don't hesitate to say that she's a darling—under the thumb, of course, of an eccentric old fool, whom she adores. He must be cracked, this—this student of the inanimate. I suspect latent insanity. Few of our best families are quite free from that. My great aunt was queer. She couldn't eat strawberries, and, being an old maid as well as an old fool, bred rabbits. She ended, I remember, by looking exactly like a Belgian hare. I return to Mary, the pretty dear. I have ordered the next number of *The Prattler*. We shall get it on Sunday morning. You recall what was hinted?"

"No."

"Really, Bertha, your memory is not what it was. The writer of the paragraph hinted that we should hear more in the next issue. The writer of that paragraph *knows*. Pussy will pop out of her bag. You take that from me. I can mark time. But I am not thinking of myself; I never do; I am simply boiling with indignation that a girl of rank, of beauty, of rare intelligence, a slave to a father's whim, should be sewing buttons on to——" he was about to say "old Merrytree's *pantaloons*," but, out

of consideration to a gentle wife, he substituted the less offensive substantive—"waistcoats."

"I don't think," said Mrs. Somervell pensively, "that the Vicar wears waistcoats."

"I can't see her in the pantry," fumed the Colonel.

"I am surprised, Arthur, that you didn't follow her there."

"I wanted to do it. I shall dig her out of it. I feel warmly about this, Bertha."

"And you look warm. We are coming to some sharp flints. Please drive more slowly."

The Colonel bit his lip but held his tongue. It was always a mistake, he reflected, to praise one woman to another. With this platitude embalmed in his mind he controlled speech till he found himself, after dinner, alone with Purdie and Ralph.

Then he broke out again, almost with virulence:

"I have seen your 'wonder,'" he remarked to his son.

"And, I suppose, you found her a swoose."

"A swoose?"

"Somebody told me the other day that a swoose was a hybrid between a swan and a goose. I think Mrs. Merrytree's parlourmaid is a swan."

"My boy, she *is* a swan. You are perfectly right." He turned to Purdie, who was sipping his wine. "I judge women and horses on their merits. Trot 'em out, and I'll tell you what I think of 'em without fear or favour. I expected to find a goose."

We know that this was not strictly true, but the victim of the preconceived idea is as unconscious of it as a child about to furnish board and lodging to the bacillus of influenza.

Purdie twinkled at him.

"What did you find, Colonel?"

"Not a mare's nest, Purdie. I have no more doubt in my mind than I have that I am talking to you that the paragraph, which has set us all guessing, was inspired. The fellow who wrote it *knows,* as I told my wife. But that hasn't influenced my judgment. It—a—couldn't."

"You really found a 'wonder'?"

"There isn't a girl in the Forest to touch her."

"That is superlative praise coming from you, Colonel."

"I don't measure my words when I am sure that I am right."

"Perhaps, from a journalist's point of view, that is the moment to do it, but I understand."

"If the girl were a parlourmaid, that would not affect my judgment of her."

"Forgive me—it would."

"I say, sir, it wouldn't. She has charm, intelligence, quick wits, manners. And that being so, does it matter a tinker's damn who her father is?"

"It wouldn't matter to me, Colonel; but surely you, with inherited traditions, are influenced in your judgments by your convictions that this 'wonder' is only masquerading as a parlourmaid."

"You touch me on the raw, Purdie; you do indeed. You hint that, merely because I happen to be a member of an old family, I am incapable of independent opinions. To be perfectly honest with you, I am rather grieved to believe that this pretty maid is the daughter of an eccentric peer. I call a spade a spade. I suspect insanity, a dreadful taint. He may be a sage, but 'great wits to madness are allied.' We have Isaiah's word for it."

"Dryden, I think, Colonel. You are surprising me."

"None of us are proof against surprise. I was shattered by surprise this afternoon."

"Quite. The varying point of view from angles of the same fact is ever shifting, non-absolute."

"Just so, but you mean——?"

"I mean that here we have one fact reasonably established as such—a girl, whoever she may be, of refinement and charm."

"I grant that with all my heart."

"Good! Probably you and I regard her from a different angle. Finding charm and refinement, you presuppose right breeding. I presuppose right environment. I believe that a female child, perfectly healthy physically, taken from some humble cottage in your forest when she was six months old, and brought up exactly as if she were a duke's daughter, carefully tended, beautifully educated amongst beautiful things, would think, behave and look like a duke's daughter. On the other hand, steal from a ducal cradle the Simon-pure article, pitchfork the infant into a Whitechapel slum, and leave her there, would she differ at twenty from the other Whitechapel damsels?"

"I don't know. You draw me into deep waters, Purdie. We had better stick to the established fact—this nice girl. We must get her out of bondage."

"She wants to escape——?"

"I can't say that. She told me she was happy. Another surprise. Why should she be happy?"

"True service makes for happiness."

"By Gad! sir, if I were a young fellow I'd soon have her out of the pantry and in front of the altar."

Purdie laughed. Ralph wriggled upon his wide-bot-

tomed Chippendale chair. Purdie's cleverness frightened him. Purdie had the old man "bogged down." Step by step he had lured him into a quagmire. He heard Purdie's derisive tones:

"You don't mean, sir, that if you were a young man, fancy free, and knowing no more about this girl than you have gleaned to-day, you would venture with her as far as the altar?"

The Colonel laughed, too.

"I have always had the courage of my convictions. I am convinced that Mrs. Merrytree's parlourmaid is the right sort. She bowled me over. I am not ashamed of it. She bowled me over."

"Really; it looks like it," assented Purdie.

CHAPTER X

THE MERRYTREES ARE THRILLED

I

MIRANDA was surprised to find Amos, her father's former assistant, in the shop when she arrived, rather late, on Thursday afternoon. Amos, apparently, was busy and warm. He wiped his honest forehead as he greeted Miranda.

"Well, miss, you do look a treat, I must say."

"Thank you, Amos," replied Miranda demurely. "Are you stocktaking for father?"

She smiled at him, because she had always liked Amos. In his way, he was not cut quite to pattern, having "ideas" of his own. A pervasive self-confidence radiated from his rosy face and plump person.

He said, with an odd air of triumph and modesty:

"Oh, no, miss. For why? There ain't enough stock to take count of, see?" Miranda nodded, as Amos continued, visibly swelling. "I've come back to your dear father, miss, as a partner kind of."

"Really? Tell me all about it."

She sat down expectantly. She guessed that her father was giving undivided attention to his new designs. Amos, probably, was at a loose end; "short of a job," as he put it. He could sell *some* papers to Moscombe customers. Probably he would just about earn his salary.

But—a partner!

Amos added proudly:

"I may take over the shop, miss. I can sell stuff, you know that. But I never 'ad a free 'and in the old days. What constitoots a good salesman, miss?"

"You tell me, Amos."

"That's easy, miss." Amos grinned confidentially. He didn't know that Miranda was in "service." Had he known it, he would have been inexpressibly shocked. The few persons in Moscombe who had the honour and privilege of acquaintance with the Issells believed that Miranda was visiting friends in the country. He went on:

"A good salesman is not, miss, one who sells customers what they *don't* want. For why? 'Owever clever he may think 'imself, the time comes, generally speaking as soon as they get 'ome, when the customers says to themselves: 'We've been 'ad.' So they don't come back. If you'll kindly excuse me, miss, that was—and is—your dear father's way of doing business. Many a time I've groaned in anguish seeing 'im shoving 'is own be—utiful papers down their ugly throats."

"I quite understand, Amos," murmured Miranda.

"My leetle way is this, miss. Customers ask, o' course, for goods we may not 'ave. This morning a lady, wearing furs——"

"In July?"

"Yes, miss. She wanted 'em noticed, see? Well, this lady asked me for a butterfly paper. She fancied butterflies. Blue butterflies, she wanted, on a white ground. I sold her birds. I made 'er believe, I did indeed, miss, that birds was all the go amongst people who could afford furs. She was so pleased with me that she's sending two more customers to-morrow morning to buy birds.

I made 'er, if you'll pardon the expression, miss, sit up and 'owl about birds. You couldn't get her to buy butterflies, not if it were never so. Now, that's what constitoots my idea of a good salesman."

"You're wonderful, Amos."

"No, miss, but I'm a stoodent of 'uman nature. I've come back to your dear father on my own terms, strictly fair as between man and man."

"Go on, please. This is very interesting."

"He's at work in the studio, hard at it, night and day. I'm here. He don't interfere with me, and I wouldn't presoom to interfere with 'im. He talks, miss, in private with me, of going back to London town as a designer to a big firm. And, if he does, I take on the shop at a fair valuation."

"Yes."

Amos inflated his round chest. He was making a tremendous impression on a young lady whom he regarded with eager eyes. He had cherished (in the old days) what he termed a "pash" for his employer's daughter. She stood far above him. But a man, a man with ideas, could climb—if he had pluck. Amos felt within him the pluck of a steeple-jack.

"You, miss, 'ave a 'ead on your shoulders."

"It is kind of you to say so, Amos."

"Brains, miss, brains. Same 'ere," he tapped a mop of brown hair with more than a tinge of auburn in it. "Now, I put it to you, what is my game 'ere; the sort o' game that a brainy young feller, only thinking of 'imself, might play?"

Miranda politely refused to hazard a conjecture.

"I might," said Amos, almost bursting with accumu-

lated brain gas, "let things drip and drivel on as they 'ave been doing since I left. That policy of masterly inactivity, miss, would redooce the valuation of the business when it come to be valued, see?"

"I see perfectly."

"Am I built that way? No. I'm a Congregationalist, miss, and you're Church of England. But I aim to be'ave like a bishop. And I aim to make good as well as to be good. That's me. In a month from date this business will be worth twice what it is to-day. Perhaps more. This is going to be a big holiday season for Moscombe. It's fair bursting, miss, with trippers. And they've money, too. I'm going to hang that window, miss, and our shop full o' stuff, bright stuff, stuff that takes the tripper in the eye and gives 'im the hiccups. And I shall sell it." He drew a deep breath. "It's ordered, miss."

"You have chosen the papers, Amos, without submitting the patterns to my father?"

"Yes, miss, that was in the bond. That is my sheet anchor, miss. You see I've learnt a bit since I left. I've biggened."

"I admit you have."

"In the shop," continued Amos, "I'm on my own at long last. A month from now your dear father, bless 'im! won't want to sell out his 'arf interest. For why? 'E'll know by then my worth, and so will you, miss."

"I repeat—you're wonderful."

She nodded gaily, and passed into the studio.

II

The Sage kissed her fondly, but regarded her with anxious eyes. The studio was littered with "studies"

that might serve to inspire the great design, the prize winner. Miranda wanted to talk about that, but Prospero was thinking about Ferdinand. And he knew that Miranda must have met Ferdinand that afternoon. Otherwise she would have been here two hours earlier. The sparkle in her eyes, the colour in her cheeks told the tale delightfully. Then she showed him her ring.

"But his parents, child?"

"I have seen them, Daddy. Colonel Somervell was ever so nice with me. We had a talk together."

"Um!"

"Why do you look so worried?"

"Because I know, Miranda, how sharp the sword is that impends above your dear little head. When will it fall? When will Colonel Somervell be told?"

"Mr. Purdie is managing everything Ralph told me this very afternoon that he was a marvel. But I mustn't ask questions."

"I knew that you had met your lover. If Mrs. Merrytree, or anybody else, finds out——?"

She laughed.

"You don't know how careful we are. And it's so—so thrilling, so just right. You met my mother like that, didn't you?"

"Yes; I did."

"So you can't blame me, can you?"

She kissed him, clinging to him.

"I am so happy, Daddy; I'm the happiest girl in the world."

"If he can make you happy that is all I ask."

He turned to his designs. Purdie, it appeared, had

done his part. Prospero showed Miranda a proof sheet of an advertisement. It was entitled: "Our Unknown Artists." She read, as follows:

"Who are our unknown artists? We ask the question because we intend to discover some of them. It is a fact that we have amongst us men whose best work is recognized by the general public, but their names, with rare exceptions, escape notice. Famous painters, musicians, authors, politicians, princes of industry are well known by name and fame. But who built some of the lovely bridges that cross our rivers and streams? How many men in a London club could write down the names of a dozen architects, or even a dozen doctors or barristers? We need not cite other instances. It remains obvious that hundreds of our fellow-countrymen, who deserve well of their country, work in comparative obscurity. This is unfair, ungenerous, and unbusinesslike. We propose to lift a corner of the veil that hides from us our designers of those exquisite chintzes, cretonnes and wall-papers which delight our eyes and decorate our homes. Unhappily, there is still an immense market for cheap, badly-designed stuff. Seeing the better, we often choose the worse. We may choose the better, when we learn the names of the designers. At any rate the credit should go to the designer, not to the firm who absorbs his output. An author, not his publisher, gets credit for a good book. When his fame is established, his books have a wider sale because his name is on the title page. We contend that the sale of the more artistic chintzes and cretonnes would increase by leaps and bounds if they were sold as the work of the artist who designed them. People, lacking, perhaps in taste, would buy such and such a chintz and point it out to their friends as the work of a man admittedly in the first rank. By simple means, such as this, the standard of taste in chintzes might be measurably raised. In our advertisement columns will be found full particulars of the prizes offered by us to the designers in this kingdom, and the conditions. The first prize is no less than five hundred pounds. We venture to predict that the man or woman who wins that prize will be known hereafter to the general public with whom we shall confidently leave him—and his fortunes."

Adam Issell carefully folded the paper, and put it into his breast pocket. Miranda was much excited.

"You will win it, Daddy."

Prospero, the magician, smiled and laughed.

"I have one design that I never sold—my best. I have been tempted to send it up a score of times to my own people."

"What did they pay you for a good design?"

"Ten pounds."

"And you will win five hundred."

"I will show you my design, child. I have never shown it—even to you."

He walked to the Breton armoire, and took from it a roll of cartridge paper, pre-war paper, delightfully thick and the colour of ivory. He unrolled it.

"Oh-h-h!" exclaimed Miranda.

No design can be set forth in words. It is intended to appeal to the eye, and, perhaps, to the memory. To Miranda the appeal was to the eye; but Prospero, when he wrought at it, must have been thinking of those long ago days when he met Miranda's mother in the South Kensington Museum, when together they gazed at masterpieces of form and colour.

"It glows," said Miranda.

She had chosen the right word. Prospero nodded.

"Yes," he said softly, "and I am going to call it, child, 'The Flame Chintz,' for surely flame of love inspired it, love of work for work's sake, love of colour, love of line and curve. Because it warmed my heart, it may warm others. I see it in dreary rooms, in dark corners, and to those who have eyes it will tell its story."

"It's perfectly beautiful."

"It's my best work."

"When did you design it, Daddy?"

"Soon after your mother died, when my heart was

cold, before you warmed it again. Somehow, I couldn't sell it."

He rolled it up, reverentially, and put it away. Then he showed her his new designs. Miranda stared at them critically.

"They are fine, but nothing like the first."

"They couldn't be."

Presently, Miranda talked of Amos, but she withheld what he had said, not wishing to hurt her sire's feelings. Prospero dismissed Amos with a few words:

"Amos came to me. I agreed to what he proposed. He's a good faithful fellow."

"And a salesman."

"And a salesman. He may take on this business. Practically he has taken it on."

"Then you really mean to leave Moscombe?"

"Yes."

"You are going back to your old firm?"

"No."

He remained silent for a moment. Then he said, hesitatingly:

"What I have to tell you, child, is for your ear only. I don't want it mentioned, even to your lover. Mr. Purdie has made me a definite offer. He appears to be a man of inexhaustible energy and resource. You understand that no man of business could pay five hundred pounds for a design unless he intended to make immense use of it?"

"I suppose not."

"The designs that win prizes will be the property of the prize givers. That is quite fair. Mr. Purdie proposes to print these prize chintzes and advertise them. He

hopes to call world-wide attention to them and the designers. Now, whether I win a prize or not, he has asked me to take charge of this printing. I mean the artistic side of the reproduction, which I understand. He has offered me a salary, and with it a slight commission on sales. I have accepted his offer gratefully."

"I should think so."

"We shall live in London, Miranda. I admit to you, child, that what Mr. Purdie is doing for me is something that can't be reckoned with in mere gratitude."

"It's far beyond me, Daddy. Why should he help us—me and you?"

"I can only suppose, Miranda, that Mr. Purdie has at heart the welfare of others. He told me, with strange bitterness, that he had been under-dog. A clever man helped him. And ever since I venture to guess he may have tried to cancel that debt by helping others. He has helped others, some of them in high places. I don't pretend to understand him. He came to see me about this offer a day or two ago. He was almost rough with me when I thanked him. I believe that he is obsessed by the desire to use his power instead of abusing it. To such a man all things are possible."

"From what Ralph tells me, he has nearly everything. He is rich and likely to be richer; he has many friends; he has health; he knows how to enjoy life."

"He is unmarried, Miranda."

"Yes; that is rather odd." Her eyes softened, as she added: "He may find somebody, some day, who will give him the greatest thing of all."

"Amen," said the Sage solemnly.

The Merrytrees Are Thrilled

III

Miranda had left home at nine. As she crossed the Whitechurch bridge, a man leaning against the stone parapet mounted a bicycle and joined her. It was Ralph.

"I hate your travelling that last bit of lonely road at night."

"But how did you get away?"

"I managed it; I had to come."

Daylight was failing fast at the end of July, but reasonably sharp eyes would have recognised either of the lovers at a glance. Miranda, not quite at ease, mentioned this. Ralph laughed at her fears.

"My darling girl, the people who know me are half asleep after dinner; the people who know you are in Moscombe. Besides, we are on the King's highway. If I met one of our own maids, I might ride a mile beside her without exciting gossip. Why, the other morning, I walked half way home from church with our cook, who's a rare good sort. I chaffed her about her new hat before all and sundry."

Miranda accepted the situation. And the road was lonely. So they sped on, engrossed in each other, blissfully reckless of the Goddess of Chance not always propitious to lovers. Each had forgotten what each knew: that the Vicar of Medbery-Hawthorne "sugared" trees for moths.

They walked slowly up the hill.

"We can slip into our sanctuary for five minutes," said the ardent Ralph.

"Not for longer than that," murmured the more cautious Miranda.

Accordingly, at the turn of the road, with none in

sight to forbid the alluring excursion, they dived into the tall bracken and disappeared. We need not follow them. What they did and said with fond repetition has been done and said many billions of times. At the end of ten minutes the pair emerged, embraced, and parted.

A minute later the Vicar, assuredly the most astounded man in his peaceful parish, stepped from under a spreading oak.

He had seen, with feelings more easily imagined than described, Captain Somervell kissing his parlourmaid. He remained for a minute in profound meditation. Then, pulling himself together, he moved towards another tree, although, for the moment, interest in his beloved hobby had become negligible.

"What," he asked himself, "will Annabella say?"

For several days Mrs. Merrytree had not spoken to him about Mary, for the excellent reason that her husband's attitude towards the daughter of an eccentric nobleman annoyed her. He refused, in fine, to believe the tale. He demanded further evidence. And he should have it, when it was forthcoming. She had mentioned to him, incidentally, that Colonel and Mrs. Somervell had called at tea-time. But the real motive animating that visit was not disclosed.

The Vicar, meanwhile, as he sugared his trees, wondered what he ought to do. Long ago he had strolled to the conclusion that hasty action, nine times out of ten, defeats itself. As a curate of souls he was prone to think good rather than evil of his fellow creatures. Further, he held Mary to be an innocent girl; he regarded Ralph as a gallant young gentleman.

But the pair had kissed.

He was grievously distressed. These young people had made him a party to a misdemeanour. He could not possibly hold his peace about it. Perhaps—he remained doubtful on the point—a word in season, discreetly spoken, might avert a scandal. It was comforting to reflect that Mrs. Merrytree, not himself, would undertake the task. He spread this ointment upon his lacerated sensibilities. Mary, in any case, must leave them. His wife, surely, would admit that. Granted even that her absurd story were true, conceding, for the sake of a lively argument, that Mary was the daughter of an eccentric peer, could she kiss captains at ten of night in secluded spots of the Forest of Ys? Most certainly not.

He returned home.

IV

Not till he was alone with his wife and snug between cool sheets did he find words. When he did find them, they were not the "winged" words of Homer. They seemed to creep and crawl out of an uneasy heart.

"My dear——"

"Yes, Alfred——?"

"Before you go to sleep I must tell you something very upsetting."

"Dear me! If it has upset you, Alfred, it will be sure to upset me."

"Yes; I feel that I cannot sleep till I have told you. I went out to-night to sugar some trees. I was at work, not three hundred yards from this house, when I heard voices. Two young people were pushing bicycles into the bracken. I was about to warn them of my presence with a cough when I became dumb with astonishment. I recognised Phyllis and Corydon."

"Phyllis and Corydon?"

"Yes; some innocent lovemaking took place almost under my nose. Under ordinary circumstances it might have rejuvenated me. But I felt senile with distress. Prepare yourself for a shock, Annabella; Phyllis was our Mary."

"Impossible!"

"And Corydon was young Somervell."

"I can't believe it."

"But you must."

Eventually, of course, she did, grappling with all the issues so disconcertingly raised.

"Alfred," she adjured him, "will you leave this delicate matter to me?"

"If you insist, my dear, I will."

"You are right about one thing. Ralph Somervell is incapable of a base action. You have surprised me; I am going to surprise you. The night before last, Kate, our Kate, rushed unceremoniously into Mary's bedroom. Maids in Kate's station of life don't observe our little decencies and proprieties. She wanted something or other with which I won't bother you. She rushed in; she found Mary in bed; she saw upon Mary's left hand, upon the engaged finger, a magnificent ring—diamonds and a stone, that I guessed, from Kate's description, to be a large turquoise."

"Bless my soul!"

"I thought you would say that. Kate told me. I begged her not to mention the fact to anybody. But, to me, it confirmed that paragraph, and taken with the book-plate——"

"What book-plate?"

The story of the book-plate was duly told. Mrs. Merrytree concluded incisively:

"You must admit, Alfred, that it is almost certain that Providence, acting inscrutably, as usual, has sent to us as parlourmaid the daughter of an eccentric nobleman."

"It really looks like it," admitted the Vicar.

"You will admit, also, that this ring is conclusive evidence that Mary is engaged to young Somervell."

"Yes; I'll admit that."

"And what have you got to say about it?"

"Nothing, Annabella; absolutely nothing."

"You will allow me to say a few words."

"I am all attention, my dear."

"I say," continued Mrs. Merrytree solemnly, "that this is a match of Heaven's own making, brought about in Heaven's sometimes peculiar way. For us to interfere, without the most careful consideration, would be verging, I feel, upon sacrilege."

"I can't go as far as that."

"Perhaps not. You may have the privilege of assisting our bishop to marry them."

"Aren't we travelling too fast?"

"Possibly. Now, Alfred, as the Vicar of this parish, you must tell me, your parishioner as well as your wife, what you deem to be my duty."

The Vicar sighed. The case, with all its complexities, seemed to outrage proportion and credibility. But he, like Colonel Somervell, was regretfully aware that many "happenings" since the War had warped judgment of them almost to breaking point. However, directly challenged, he essayed to do his duty. But he felt like a

pilot coming into port in a black fog, groping his way, by dead reckoning, up a narrow, winding channel with mud banks on each side of it.

"I think, my dear, that our parlourmaid cannot be permitted to meet a young gentleman on the sly. Why there should be this mystery I cannot attempt to explain. I accept it as a mystery to be cleared up in good time. To discharge Mary, after breakfast to-morrow morning, might be too drastic. Under the special circumstances, we can hardly do the obvious thing. To speak quietly to her, to ask for an explanation, is not too easy, because, if she refused to enlighten us, we must insist upon her leaving at once. In this parish, when I have been called upon to adjust unsatisfactory relations between a man and a maid, I have always tackled the man first. I might speak to young Somervell."

"And if—if *he* refused to enlighten us?"

"The situation would be painful."

"We will sleep over this, Alfred, if we can. You are upset, and so am I. At the same time, I do feel that we two dull old folks are up to our eyes in romance. We never met on the sly."

"No."

"My father was not an eccentric nobleman."

"Fortunately for me he wasn't."

"Surely, Alfred, you are conscious of a thrill?"

"I am conscious, my dear, of being confoundedly wide awake, with an unhappy prospect of a restless night."

Nevertheless, Morpheus—or was it Ariel?—took compassion upon these two kind souls. Within half an hour they were soundly asleep.

The Merrytrees Are Thrilled

V

Looking at Mary's face next morning more thrills coursed up and down Mrs. Merrytree's ample back. She could hardly keep her eyes off the girl at Family Prayers, beholding her in white satin and orange blossom kneeling before a bishop, with Alfred, wearing his Master's hood, hovering in the background. She might be asked to stand sponsor to Mary's first-born.

Me-an'-Kate walked out of the dining-room; Mary tripped after them, but came back immediately with a tray. The Vicar helped himself to bacon; Mrs. Merrytree made the tea. They had sat together like this for more than twenty years with nothing to disturb their peace, nothing, that is to say, which might whirl them out of themselves, transmuting the prose of life into poetry.

Mrs. Merrytree felt whirled out of herself. Ariel may have whispered to her that she had missed something tremendous and amorphous. She wondered vaguely whether she and her husband had missed—youth. Had they been born—old? What was Mary feeling? She looked surprisingly cool and demure, although a faint smile—was it derisive?—flickered about her pretty lips, the lips kissed by Ralph Somervell "on the sly."

She thought of the lovers kissing each other beneath the stars. She wished that once, only once, she could have met her Alfred *au clair de la lune* under the elm trees in the cathedral close of her native town.

"I have made up my mind what to do," she said sadly.

The Vicar looked up. He was comfortably aware that his good wife could make up her mind as methodically as she could make her bed, if necessity imposed such a

task upon her. And she could make up his mind also. He could appreciate this the more because, beneath a somewhat passive and commonplace exterior, lurked a mild sense of humour, which often revealed itself startlingly, like a Jack-in-the-Box. Left entirely to himself, the Vicar of Medbery-Hawthorne might have astonished many persons in his parish. He was gratefully aware that his wife "ordered" his mind for him even before she made it up. She, so to speak, flung back the sheets and blankets and allowed the breeze of common sense to ventilate the coverlets.

"Yes, dear?"

"The situation is impossible."

"If you say so, it must be so."

"I mean by 'impossible' that the presence here of a parlourmaid who wears a diamond and turquoise ring at night must upset the other maids. With the best will in the world they cannot and will not hold their tongues."

"I agree."

"Probably they are chattering at this moment."

"I can imagine more unlikely things."

"At the same time, Alfred, I don't want to ask Kate to do the parlour work in addition to her own duties, and I must consider your comfort. Without speaking to Mary I can see Mrs. Paxton, who might be able to provide another maid at short notice. Mary must leave us."

"I fear so."

"I come now to a matter of even more serious importance. At whatever cost to my own feelings—and I confess that my sympathies are with the young people—I cannot hush up this romantic affair. The Somervells would be greatly incensed, and with reason, if they dis-

covered later on that I had kept secret from them something which they ought to know. . . ."

She paused, glancing at her husband. He nodded.

"Yes, Annabella, yes; the Somervells ought to know."

"I shall tell them this afternoon."

"You will do what you think best, my dear."

"I shall do, as I would be done by. If I had a son, and if he were meeting a maidservant of the Somervells, whoever she might be, secretly and at night, I should feel aggrieved, cruelly aggrieved, if Mrs. Somervell, a neighbour and a friend, knowing the fact, kept it from me."

"You have stated the case—exhaustively."

"But, I repeat, my sympathies are with the young people."

"And—and so are mine, Annabella."

The Vicar took a new-laid egg, chipped it, and relapsed into silence.

CHAPTER XI

THE COLONEL'S ULTIMATUM

I

UPON the afternoon of this eventful day, Colonel and Mrs. Somervell were, as usual, at home. Since the War they rarely ventured beyond the ring fence that encompassed Chorley House and its paddocks. Inside that ring fence they felt reasonably safe; outside it disconcerting things happened. It was a grievance of the Colonel's that urchins in Puddenhurst no longer touched caps to Authority; petty tradesmen had adopted a curter manner, and the picturesque high street straggling down the centre of the once happy village was filled, of an afternoon, with noisy trippers vomited out of gaudy chars-à-bancs from Moscombe and Cronmouth. The Colonel, leisurely descending the familiar slope, reflecting mournfully upon changed conditions, would be constrained to hop nimbly out of the way of a motor-bike propelled at excess speed by some unspeakable bounder whose offence was not mitigated by the fact that he carried behind him, or beside him, some scantily-dressed young woman of prepossessing appearance. The Colonel's faultless breeches and leggings were bespattered with mud or smothered with dust and his feelings lacerated by raucous laughs.

"I stay at home," he said testily.

The Colonel's Ultimatum

Purdie and Ralph had motored to Melchester; Ruth was playing tennis upon a neighbouring lawn. The Colonel was pottering about the paddocks, wondering what he would get for his hay. Ought he to sell it at once, or wait for a better price later on? Such questions had become paramount in his mind. Mrs. Somervell sat sewing in the shade, raising her graceful head now and again to glance at her lord. Time was slipping by, she reflected, and dear Ralph had not yet made up his mind about India, which seemed infinitely remote. Her heart, as has been said, was not of the strongest. At times it fluttered intermittently. One day it would stop. She was not unduly oppressed by this thought. And with ordinary care she might hope to live for many years. Still—India was so far off. And Ralph was an only son. He had come through the dreadful war almost unscratched. To lose him now seemed unfair and unnecessary. The boy's father felt just as she did about that. Why did Ralph hesitate?

The aged butler approached, followed by Mrs. Merrytree. Mrs. Somervell rose, holding out her delicate hand.

"I am so glad to see you."

She wasn't. She wished to be left alone with her thoughts, but her greeting was none the less cordial on that account.

"Please tell the Colonel that Mrs. Merrytree is here."

The butler withdrew. Mrs. Somervell indicated the most comfortable of three chairs, and Mrs. Merrytree sank into it.

"A close day, Mrs. Merrytree."

"Very."

Politely they exchanged platitudes till the Colonel saun-

tered up, spud-stick in hand. He greeted the visitor handsomely and sincerely. He recognised in her a receiver rather than a transmitter of news. She would listen, deferentially, to his diatribes and accept his judgments as infallible.

"The hay is all in," he announced, "a fine crop."

"Ah! The Vicar is delighted with the increased size of his little stack. You and Mrs. Somervell are alone?"

"We are left alone," said the Colonel tartly. This happened to be another grievance. Although he and his wife elected to remain in what their visitor termed "absurd isolation," the Colonel complained because his neighbours, of much the same kidney, did as he did.

Mrs. Merrytree paused to "round up" carefully prepared phrases. Possibly, she had dramatic instincts. And, hating surprises, she shrank from startling her friends. But, back of her mind, lay the conviction that her message when delivered would not be reckoned disagreeable.

"I have come to talk to you about my Mary."

The possessive pronoun seemed to sweeten the name.

"Um! She is leaving you. She can't stick it."

Mrs. Merrytree frowned. The Colonel was outspoken, but she knew that no offence was intended.

"The Vicar thinks that her position with us is untenable."

"The Vicar is right. The young lady is lucky to have found such a place as yours for her ridiculous experiment, but I knew that, however kind *you* might be, she would leave you."

"You are slightly mistaken, Colonel. The Vicar is of opinion that we must give Mary notice. For the moment

she is quite unaware of our intention. She has expressed no wish to leave, very much the contrary."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. We have made the discovery that Mary is engaged to be married. She wears, at night, a magnificent ring. My housemaid saw it upon the right finger. Yesterday evening, at five minutes to ten, the Vicar, who was sugaring trees near the Cronmouth road, saw Mary kissing or being kissed—it makes no difference—by a young gentleman."

"I am not surprised," declared the Colonel. "If I were five and twenty years younger, Mrs. Merrytree, I should envy that young gentleman. I am not too old to envy him as it is."

"What things you say, Arthur," murmured Mrs. Somervell.

"I always say what I mean, Bertha."

"You are interrupting Mrs. Merrytree at a most interesting point."

"The Vicar," continued Mrs. Merrytree, "was not seen by the young people. He was simply dumb with astonishment. He remained where he was. Mary hurried back to the Vicarage—I expect all my maids to be in at ten—the young gentleman——"

"Returned to Cronmouth," hazarded the Colonel.

"No. He took the Puddenhurst road. Can you guess who he is?"

"I haven't a notion. I believe that one or two sprigs of quality are staying in Puddenhurst for the buck-hunting. We begin next Monday."

"He is a sprig of quality, Colonel."

"What! The Vicar recognised him——? This is ex-

citing. You hear, Bertha. The Vicar recognised kisser and kissee. Who is he? We're on tenterhooks. Who is he?"

"Your Ralph."

II

Some surprises are so utterly unforeseen that they paralyse minds and bodies. Both the Colonel and Mrs. Somervell were thus affected. They didn't speak; they sat still. When the mother grasped the meaning of what was said, her first poignant reflection concerned itself with such news reaching her indirectly. In imagination, a thousand times at least, she had pictured her boy coming to her, kissing her, and whispering the happy truth. That he had not done so became a cruel disappointment. And being a devoted mother she thought, instantly, to excuse him. Great pressure must have been brought to bear upon Ralph, probably by this mysterious girl whom, to be candid, she had not yet accepted as a paragon. The Colonel's enthusiasm had left Mrs. Somervell cold, or, at best, lukewarm. Mary had good looks and good manners. Further than that she was not prepared to go. Oddly enough, unless we give the credit to intuition, she believed what was so solemnly affirmed by Mrs. Merrytree. *Mary was engaged to Ralph.*

The effect upon the Colonel was objective. He forgot himself entirely for an instant. He beheld the daughter of an eccentric but rich peer dropping a filmy handkerchief which his boy had promptly picked up, returning it to the young lady with his heart inside it. For the moment, he was incapable of blaming Ralph. Dashing young fellows dashed into love and matrimony without consulting their sires. Like his wife, he felt positive

that pretty Lady M. had imposed secrecy upon an ingenuous youth. And, really, she was too pretty to be scolded about it.

He burst out laughing.

Mrs. Merrytree looked shocked. She was prepared for explosions, not for laughter.

"The rogues!" exclaimed the Colonel.

Mrs. Merrytree said gently:

"Dear Colonel Somervell, you take this better than I had dared to hope."

And somehow—we cannot analyse the why and wherefore—her voice and manner conveyed to the Colonel high approval and admiration. Obviously, in the estimation of a good woman, he had surpassed expectation.

"As to that," he said genially, "where could I find a more attractive daughter-in-law?"

"Where, indeed?"

"But I agree with you that Mary cannot remain in your service. She must be sent packing to her ridiculous father. I shall have to be civil to him, I suppose, but the sooner we meet and come to an understanding, the better."

Mrs. Merrytree assented, adding:

"I shall say a word to Mary to-night."

The Colonel considered this. He was already so fond of Mary that he desired to treat her tenderly. The romantic adventure had gone far enough, at the same time Mary, little witch, had played her part delightfully, entering into the spirit of the thing. To summon her, to give her notice, as if she were really a parlourmaid, jarred upon the Colonel's sense of what was fitting.

"You will do as you think fit, but if you consult me——"

"I do—I do."

"Then I think we might mark time a *leetle* longer. Let me speak to Ralph when he returns from Melchester. I shall extract all the truth out of the boy. Because, of course, he knows."

"Yes; he must know."

The Colonel rubbed his hands together, warming to the pleasant work ahead.

"I think I see my way. Mary, acting, probably, under her father's instructions, has played a game upon us. You agree with me, Bertha?"

Mrs. Somervell said slowly:

"I don't take this as lightly as you do, Arthur. An engagement to me is serious. We know nothing of this girl. Her father may be more than eccentric. You hinted as much coming back on Wednesday from Medbery-Hawthorne. I should oppose, very strongly, our son entering any family, however distinguished, in which there was insanity."

The Colonel fumed a little.

"My dear Bertha, why borrow trouble in a world too full of it? Where was I?"

He turned to Mrs. Merrytree.

"You had just observed that Mary had played a game on us."

"Yes; and played it well. Let her go on playing it for a few hours longer till—till we are fully prepared to deal with her. I may be wrong, but I fancy the right person to tell her that the position is untenable is Ralph."

"By all means. I shall have difficulty in replacing Mary at a minute's notice."

"Quite so. When a horse runs away with me, I let him run. When he slows up I make him run farther than he intended. I am tempted to make this sly little puss go on working for you. Then we should have the laugh on her—hay?"

"It's not a laughing matter, Arthur."

The appearance of the aged butler with the tea things imposed a change of conversation. Before Mrs. Merrytree left Chorley House it was understood that time should be marked by her. On the morrow, so the Colonel said, with many chucklings, Ralph and he might ride over to Medbery-Hawthorne.

"I believe," concluded Ralph's father, "that everything has turned out, or will turn out, for the best."

"I wish I could think so," murmured Mrs. Somervell.

III

When Mrs. Merrytree disappeared down the drive in her pony cart, the Colonel, whistling cheerfully, returned to his wife. His had been a happy marriage, and, perhaps, he was inclined to give himself undue credit for that. He believed—millions of men share his belief—that his Bertha shared his views upon all things that mattered, simply because she was too clever to contradict him and too weak, physically, to engage in argument with a man who was incapable of debating any point with detachment. Very early in life the Preconceived Idea had marked Arthur Somervell as its own. He was, indeed, from the tip of a neat boot to the top of a Lock hat, the preconceived idea of what a Colonel, once a Guardsman,

and living with independent means upon his own property, ought to be. Adam Issell would have cited him as a type, not a character. He was true to type. That, of course, is much, if the type be good. And his type is good. Such men as Colonel Somervell have accomplished great things in the past. Unhappily, so far as the future is concerned they are likely to remain insensible to change, which is a pity.

Mrs. Somervell, not a type, had realised early in her married life that her husband was a most agreeable companion when he had his own way. Accordingly she let him have it. She recognised in him great qualities; she ignored his defects. One of these defects happened to be an encrusted conviction that the Somervells were entitled, by Right Divine, to certain privileges and amenities. Every Sunday, the Colonel thanked God, in a loud voice, for the blessings vouchsafed him, but a cynic might have asked if really he was grateful. Outside the family pew, gratitude did not seem exactly to radiate from him. But, in his way, he expressed a form of it.

"I have had a tolerable innings," he would remark, "and I congratulate myself upon having picked the right time to bat."

As he strolled to his wife, he was reflecting complacently that he, not she, had acclaimed Mary at first sight. He was almost overcome by his own perspicacity. Long ago, he had decided that his boy would marry the right girl. He would do so because he was a Somervell and his father's son. As his father's son he had captured, lock, stock and barrel, "pretty Lady M."

The Colonel glanced at a gold hunting watch. Ralph and Purdie would be back soon. Purdie, poor fel-

low, would have to write letters; Ralph and himself could take a stroll together before the dressing-gong sounded.

"Well, my dear, this settles the India question."

"Perhaps."

The Colonel, standing above her, even more upright than usual, looked down upon her placid face. At the moment he was thinking that poor Bertha lacked "drive." A strain of "drive" in Ralph's wife would be acceptable.

"Why do you say 'perhaps'? Ralph will now settle down, not too far from us, I hope. I'm looking forward to teaching his youngsters to ride. There are two or three good properties in the market. The boy might take on the hounds."

"You go too fast for me, Arthur."

"What a dear old slow-coach it is, to be sure!"

"Why has Ralph kept this from us?"

"I can answer that question, Bertha. Ralph is expecting to give us the pleasantest surprise. But I shall turn the tables on him, and surprise him."

"You accept her before you know who she is? That astonishes me. It's—it's so unlike you."

"Unlike me not to know a good thing when I see it? At first glance I recognised Mary as quality."

"How do you know that her name is Mary? All the parlourmaids at the Vicarage are called Mary. I am feeling very uneasy."

"Why?"

"I can't explain. You are partly the cause of my uneasiness. You make so absolutely sure that things are right."

"I have faith in my Maker," replied the Colonel piously.

"Ah! The longer I live, Arthur, the more I realise that God's ways are not entirely Somervell ways."

The Colonel stared at her. Rarely, indeed, did his wife stray from his path; when she did so, he always stared at her and shook his head.

"The weather is oppressive," he remarked. "It has affected you, Bertha."

"Perhaps. I think I shall go in and lie down."

He assisted her courteously. Much may be forgiven him, because he never failed to please his wife as a *preux chevalier*. He rose when she entered a room or left it; he accompanied her to her carriage; he presented her with roses; he paid her little compliments. Men who practise such arts are beloved by their womenfolk.

She went to her room.

The Colonel walked as far as the stables, not too near the house. Empty stalls and loose boxes afflicted his eye. It brightened as he beheld Ralph's hunter, which whinnied as he approached her. Then he smiled, thinking of full stables, hearing all the delightful sounds once so familiar, the steady chumping of corn, the pawing of impatient hoofs upon stones, the rattle of buckets, the occasional squeal.

If the good old times could return——!

The daughter of a rich but eccentric nobleman might accomplish such a miracle.

Did she ride——?

He hoped so, but if she didn't his boy could afford to spend more on his gees. Bertha had given up hunt-

ing when the babies came. It made an appreciable difference to him.

A motor-horn tooted.

IV

He left the stables as the car drew up opposite the garage. Purdie descended. Ralph backed the car into its appointed place.

"You here, Father?" said Ralph. "You told me you couldn't stick empty stalls."

"They may not be empty this time next year."

Ralph nodded. Obviously, his father was considering the possible demise of the Head of the Family. He knew that such a contingency would not translate his sire to another county. He would consent to take his seat in the Upper House, and then he would return to Chorley.

The Colonel observed certain formalities. He asked his guest if he had enjoyed his visit to Melchester and listened politely to Purdie's caustic comments upon a town that lay fast asleep beneath the most glorious spire in the kingdom. As he expected, Purdie hurried away to write his letters. Father and son were alone.

"Come into the paddocks, my boy."

"With pleasure."

"I am looking forward to a quiet talk with you."

They strolled, in silence, through the garden, across a sunk fence, and into the first paddock. Here and there were fine trees which gave the field a park-like appearance. A profiteer, buying Chorley House, would consider, possibly, the propriety of rechristening the domain. It was called by the villagers—The Park. Under a Spanish chestnut was a seat. Upon this Colonel Somer-

vell sat, making room beside him for his son. From this seat no house nor cottage was visible except Chorley House. The Forest surrounded these fields. And the Forest, by Act of Parliament, was sacrosanct.

A cool breeze, bearing the fragrance of new mown hay, now tempered the too sultry heat of the afternoon. In the next paddock the Colonel's Jerseys were grazing. Even in war time there had been cream for the Colonel's tea and no real shortage of butter.

"Jolly, isn't it?" said Ralph.

He suspected nothing from his sire's rather protracted silence. And he perceived that the Colonel was in a good temper.

"Yes, it's England. I hate to leave England, because I can't find all this," he waved his hand, "anywhere else."

"I suppose not."

"Your mother and I were talking this afternoon of India. You must make up your mind definitely about that within a few days."

"Yes."

"Well, what about it?"

"I don't want to go to India."

"Why should you go?"

"I might have to go."

The Colonel had mentioned India, because he wished to give his boy a chance. He hoped that Ralph would tell his story without undue pressure. Little did he guess that pressure had been applied to his son and heir by Purdie. Coming back from Melchester, Purdie had said curtly: "Your father is ripe for your confession.

He will never be riper. He can't think better of Miranda than he does at this minute. He has committed himself irretrievably."

Such words from such a man were impressive. And yet Ralph had temporised. He was happy; Miranda was happy. Why not slide along smoothly upon lines of least resistance for a wee bittie? But Purdie had not been sympathetic. He had spoken almost brutally: "You are sliding away from the right opportunity, an indication of weakness. Go for your father at once! Ariel has been kind to us. Exactly what I wanted has come to pass, much quicker than I anticipated. Your father believes that he has detected in a parlourmaid all the qualities that he demands in your wife. Strike!"

The Colonel said testily:

"What do you mean, Ralph, by having to go?"

"One gets higher pay in India." Pausing for an instant, he added nervously: "If—if you cut off my allowance, I could live in India on my pay."

"Cut off your allowance——! What the devil are you talking about?"

"Such things have happened, Father. I—I might want to—to marry somebody whom you didn't like."

The Colonel was at the end of his tether. Ralph's hesitations and nervousness exasperated him.

"You want to marry—somebody?"

"Yes; I do."

"Not Alice Apperton?"

"Not Alice Apperton."

The Colonel's voice softened. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Tell me all about it, my boy. You have fallen in love, what?"

"I have."

"With—with anybody I know?"

"You have met her; you liked her, but I hardly dare tell you who she is."

"Don't be a damned fool! If I like her, that ought to make things easier. Come——!"

"She is Mrs. Merrytree's parlourmaid."

The Colonel rocked with laughter. Ralph said, in his best military manner:

"This amuses you, sir."

"Because you thought that you would spring this as a surprise on me."

"Isn't it a surprise?"

"Not a bit of it. Mrs. Merrytree sprung the surprise this afternoon. You were caught, my boy, caught! The Vicar nabbed you. What did you fork out for that ring?"

Stupefied, Ralph gazed at his chuckling sire. Suddenly he felt his hand grasped firmly; he heard his father's voice warmly affectionate:

"I congratulate you with all my heart."

Ralph recovered himself.

"You think her a darling?"

"I prefer your own word—a wonder."

"You say we were nabbed—by the Vicar?"

The Colonel explained, cutting short the story. He ended triumphantly:

"I spotted her in a jiffy as quality. But she remains to me a pretty mystery. But you must know who she is."

"Yes; I know."

"I take it that you met her before she became a parlourmaid."

"I did."

"Perhaps you protested."

"Yes."

"She has an eccentric father?"

"You might call him that. I don't. He's a wonder, too."

"For the Lord's sake, uncork yourself! Who is he?"

"Adam Issell."

The Colonel's memory had become treacherous in regard to matters of importance, but it retained trifles. He remembered Adam Issell, the designer of papers. Under the paralysing shock of discovering that Mary's father was not a nobleman, the name of Issell flared out, even as the bull's-eye lantern of a constable may shine dazzlingly in the eyes of an inebriated foot-passenger.

"You tell me that Mrs. Merrytree's parlourmaid is the daughter of Adam Issell, who designs wall-papers at Moscombe?"

"Yes."

The Colonel's voice became icy.

"I want more exact information about Mr. Adam Issell."

Stung by his father's tone, Ralph delivered a blow over the heart.

"He keeps a small shop in Moscombe. He is a painter and decorator, a petty tradesman, not—not prosperous. Apart from that he's an artist—a genius. And his daughter has, as you say, quality."

"You want to marry the daughter of a petty tradesman."

"I want to marry the sweetest girl in the world."

v

Ralph waited for an explosion. His father, he decided, must let off steam. Then he would simmer a bit; in the end—after what he had said about Miranda—he would calm down and listen to the voice of reason. Purdie would tackle him. His father was no match for old Miles. These thoughts percolated through his mind as he waited for the explosion which seemed to be strangely delayed. The Colonel stared at the pleasant landscape. Then he got up.

"I am going to your mother," he said quietly. "We shall meet at dinner, Ralph, and your friend will be there. Does he know about this?"

"Yes; I told him."

"Um!"

Ralph muttered deprecatingly:

"I'm afraid this has shaken you up, Father."

"Shaken me up?" the Colonel's voice trembled. "I—I simply don't know where I am."

He stumped towards the house, walking heavily, doggedly, as if progress were a pain to him. Ralph lit a cigarette and remained where he was. Some process of disintegration began to work within him. For example, he realised that the bubble of romance, so iridescent, reflecting, like a concave mirror, the colour and movement of life, had been pricked. Being a true Somervell, he thought to himself ruefully: "I'm not sure that old Miles has not made a mess of this." He had

never seen his father so quiet under provocation. He was behaving as if he were stunned.

Ralph's imagination, not particularly vivid, failed to carry him much afield on a path overhung by brambles. However, he pushed on in fancy, till he reached his mother's room. What would she say? Could he count on her sympathy? Would she be stunned?

It occurred to him presently that Purdie might illuminate his darkness. He still believed that Purdie's dominating personality must prevail. At any rate, he owed it to his friend to prepare him for a dinner that must be eaten without much appetite. He finished his cigarette and returned to the house.

Purdie was stamping the last envelope when Ralph entered the smoking-room.

"You have told your father," said Purdie.

"How on earth do you know?"

"It's written in indelible ink upon your ingenuous countenance. He said nothing, of course."

"It beats me how you get at your facts, Miles. Yes; he said nothing; he is with Mother at this moment. I didn't surprise him; he surprised me. Old Merrytree, confound him! caught me kissing Miranda and blabbed. Somehow they know that I gave Miranda a ring."

"I was counting on all this," said Purdie. "Everything has turned out 'according to plan.'"

Ralph felt dizzy. He sat down, almost gaping at his omniscient friend.

"You—you wanted me to be caught?"

"Certainly. I admit that Ariel seems to have worked hand in hand with me."

"I expected Father to—to bust."

"He may—later. He will assuredly if he discovers that I inspired that paragraph in *The Prattler*. There will be another in this week's issue flatly contradicting it. But mum's the word."

"I should think so. Perhaps you will tell me that everything has turned out not only according to plan, but as you wished it?"

"Yes. The objective has been reached. Your father has accepted Miranda as she really is. He has admitted to us that she is quality. How, I ask you, can he stultify himself by repudiating his own judgments?"

"Father is—Father. When I got into debt, before the War, soon after joining, he was furious, but he paid up. I should feel happier now if he had stormed a bit. He asked if you knew, and I said you did. He grunted, another bad sign. I'm afraid, Miles, you won't enjoy your dinner."

"Don't worry about that! I shall." His voice became sharper, as he added: "I shall attempt to deal with the Colonel faithfully, but you must stand by. If you weaken, we are done."

"Why should I weaken?"

"You are a Somervell."

Ralph betrayed slight annoyance.

"The Somervells are not weak," he declared.

Purdie grinned at him. It seemed to the younger man that his friend was actually enjoying an abominable situation, sucking satisfaction out of the troubles and perplexities of an ancient family. Purdie may have guessed this. He laid a strong hand on Ralph's shoulder.

"I'm not an easy man to follow across my own line of country. What I mean is briefly this. Fetter strength

and it becomes weakness. All you Somervells are fettered by family traditions and prejudices."

"I'm not."

"That remains to be seen. If you are strong, you will win through. I tell you this, a strong man knows his own weakness and guards against it. A weak man knows, perhaps, where he is strong, and forgets that he is weak. In a gymnasium I have seen fellows exercising over-developed biceps and triceps when they should be giving attention to weak underpinning. I'm off to have a cold bath."

He laughed again and left the room.

VI

Mrs. Somervell did not appear at dinner. Ruth took her place. The Colonel did the honours as usual. Even Purdie, a hyper-critic, admired his self-possession. The Old Guard, of course, went into action with colours flying and trumpets blaring. The talk centred upon hunting and the increased cost of sport. Ralph said little; Purdie interpolated a few questions, enough to keep his host "going strong." After Ruth had left the dining-room, the men didn't linger long over their wine. The Colonel proposed that coffee should be drunk in the smoking-room. Ralph assented, smiling inwardly. He guessed that his sire meant to "have it out" before Purdie. He couldn't help admiring Somervell pluck. Obviously, two-to-one odds failed to dismay the veteran.

Three cigars were lighted before the Colonel fired the first shot.

"I have been had," said the master of Chorley House.

It was a magnificent opening. Purdie blinked. Sub-

ordinates in his office had noticed a trick of the journalist's, a significant trick, which had become habitual. When Miles Purdie was "fairly up against it," he would remove his spectacles, wipe them carefully, and put them on again. He did so now. The Colonel continued:

"I am going to speak frankly before your friend, Ralph, because you took him into your confidence first, a confidence you withheld from your mother and me."

The Colonel had prepared this sentence in his dressing-room. He delivered it sonorously.

"That's all right, Father."

"I don't think so, nor does your mother. But we must take things as we find 'em. She is much upset. I prevailed upon her to go to bed. I repeat I have been had."

"In what way, Father?"

"Mrs. Merrytree," said the Colonel solemnly, "came to me with a cock-and-bull story about her parlourmaid being the daughter of a nobleman, and she asked for my advice, which is always at the service of an old friend. There was a paragraph in some rag or other. But what bowled me over was a book-plate, surmounted by a coronet, in some volume of verse found by Mrs. Merrytree in the girl's room. The volume disappeared."

"I have it, Father."

"You have it?"

"Miranda gave it to me."

"Miranda?"

"That is her name, which describes her to a 't.'"

"No matter."

"If you had seen the book-plate, Father, you would have soon found out that the escutcheon belongs to an

impoverished baron who has no children. I looked it out. Miranda's father bought the book at a second-hand bookshop and gave it to Miranda when she was fourteen."

"A most extraordinary coincidence! Anyway, the romantic story appealed to me. There's no fool like an old fool. To cut it short I was beguiled into delivering judgment upon a young woman, a very attractive young woman, when I was not in possession of all the facts concerning her."

"You admit that you cottoned to her?"

The young man's voice was querulous. He had not anticipated admissions; he had supposed that his father would defend an outspoken opinion; he had forgotten something that he ought to have known. His father, however reactionary, detested lying. He prided himself on telling the truth however unpalatable it might be to others. In this case the truth was horribly unpalatable to himself. It was humiliating to reflect that he had been had, but that was the overmastering conclusion, the first and last conclusion not to be evaded by an honest man. Alone with his wife, before she had time to speak, he had exclaimed: "I'm done crisp as a biscuit."

"I admit that I made a fool of myself."

Ralph cast a hunted glance at Purdie, who, certainly, was not enjoying his cigar. The Colonel was clever enough to interpret that glance. He said stiffly:

"It's not pleasant to admit as much in the presence of your friend. Have you asked him to defend you?"

Ralph wriggled.

"I can defend him," said Purdie.

"Pray do! I draw the unflattering inference that my son is incapable of defending himself."

"Let us say rather," continued Purdie, "that he is too distressed at the pain he has inflicted on you to plead his case calmly and to the best advantage. And I, as your guest, sensible of the kindness and hospitality you have shown me, am hampered as his advocate."

Not to be outdone in courtesy, the Colonel inclined his head, saying blandly:

"My son is fortunate in having so clever an advocate. I will listen to whatever you have to say."

Purdie puffed at his cigar, slowly marshalling his wits. The Colonel, he reflected, was a formidable antagonist. He had marched into the open, disdaining trench warfare and "dug-outs." Had he sheltered himself behind his own words, Purdie's task would have been easy.

"Is it necessary, Colonel, that your son's wife should bring money into the family?"

"Money is always handy," growled the Colonel, "but we could worry along without that."

"Thank you. You would expect good health, intelligence, a sweet disposition?" The Colonel nodded. "Miranda Issell has these great gifts. She is well educated, able to take her place and keep it in any society."

"Possibly."

"Then it really comes to this. You object to her as a putative daughter-in-law merely because her father happens to be a tradesman?"

"I do," replied the Colonel trenchantly. "As the daughter of a tradesman I refuse to consider her as a possible daughter-in-law."

"Some of our peers began life as tradesmen."

"Adam Issell of Moscombe is not a peer."

"Then Adam Issell is actually the stumbling-block?"

"He is."

"You have not yet met him?"

"No."

"He is no ordinary man. I believe that he will take his right place as an artist before long. He intends to leave Moscombe."

"Mr. Issell's plans don't interest me. Did you encourage Ralph to make love to his daughter?"

Fortunately, Purdie was able to reply promptly:

"Your son was engaged to Miranda Issell before I met her."

"Do you defend his falling in love with a young woman not in his own rank in life, and keeping his engagement to her a secret from his parents?"

"Love imposes itself, sir. Miranda Issell captivated Ralph as she captivated you—and me. Ralph wanted you to meet her. He was certain you would recognise her quality. And you did—instantly. If you met her father, you would recognise his quality. I urge you to meet him."

"And I refuse to do so."

"You regard his trade as a stigma?"

"Nothing of the sort. I oppose this marriage. I shall use every means in my power to prevent it, because I know myself and my son. Passion, a passing phase, has swept him off his feet. I make allowance for that. I believe—and my wife shares that belief—that only unhappiness could come from such a match. The Somervells don't marry out of their class. I am considering this unfortunate affair from every point of view. I can speak, I know, for the Head of my Family. His large property is unentailed. He would not leave it to my son,

if he married this girl. In short, I conceive it to be my duty to say that such a marriage would cut off my son from all of us. I bring great pressure to bear upon him in his interests. And—there is nothing more to be said."

"You refuse to consider the girl?"

"Why should I consider her?"

"This story may leak out. If it ends in marriage, gossip is silenced; if it doesn't, Miranda Issell's good name is imperilled."

"That is not my affair, Purdie."

He stood up, very erect.

"I will say good night. Let Ralph think things over. He is wise to hold his tongue till he has done so. I shall go to my wife."

He went out, and the door slammed significantly behind him.

CHAPTER XII

PURDIE PLAYS PROXY

I

AS soon as the Colonel had left the room, Ralph replenished his glass with the old brandy that ranked, in its owner's opinion, with the '68 port. Purdie threw away his half-finished cigar and began to load his pipe.

The Colonel had defeated him in the first round. His antagonist was other than what he had supposed him to be. He glanced at Ralph, curled up in a big arm-chair. Had he been mistaken in him? He said quietly:

"Pace kills. We have—all of us—travelled too fast. But how can we slow up now?"

"I feel down and out. Father is simply—impossible."

"Not at all."

"I can tell you this, Miles. He means what he says."

"He means what he says—at the moment. He meant all that he said about Miranda. Conditions change his point of view. That is indisputable. He is a slave to conditions and traditions. Apparently he nails his flag to this mast—the Somervells have never married out of their class."

"It's time they did."

"I'm beginning to think so."

Ralph sat up.

"You mean——?"

"It is up to you to change the Somervell tradition. Are you man enough to do it?"

"You advise me to defy my father? To marry Miranda against his consent?"

"It is what I should do myself. It has already occurred to you. She is worth fighting for. I don't think she is to be won peacefully. I have never won anything worth having—peacefully. When you proposed to Miranda, you expected to fight hard. Are you of the same mind to-night?"

"I am not myself to-night."

"But you ought to be. I can't size up any man thoroughly till I find him face to face with an emergency. In moments of danger we become our real selves. We rise to our full stature, or fall cubits below it. That is why war brings out the best and worst in a man. He hasn't time to think; he acts. Your father has acted, according to his lights. I misread him. I believed that he would temporise. If he hesitated he would be lost in a sea of his own words. But he repudiates his judgments and instincts. He acts—blindly, reverting to type. He becomes the Roman father, the Lucius Junius Brutus, trampling underfoot everybody who differs from him. Violence masquerades as strength. I see him clearly, but I don't quite see you."

"I don't see myself; I wish I could."

Purdie looked grim. He had misread the father and son. At this moment, of the two he had the greater respect for the father. But he felt pity for Ralph, as he wriggled before him, a worm on the hook of Destiny. Something told a man of immense experience that this nice boy would not rise to his full stature. Already he

was shrinking. Purdie was in no mood to throw stones at him. He remained silent, thinking of Miranda.

Unless he had misread her, she, too, would act promptly and resolutely. He recalled her eyes and chin. The eyes might fill with bitter tears; the chin would keep its angle.

Purdie dismissed from his thought the girl, and gave undivided attention to the man.

"What are you going to do to-morrow, Ralph?"

"I don't know, Miles. What can I do? My mother, you know, has a weak heart."

"I would sooner have that than a weak head. You have been caught kissing the parlourmaid at Medbery-Hawthorne. That doesn't interest your father, but you can't kiss and kiss again without ructions at the Vicarage. What are you going to say to Mrs. Merrytree?"

"I must go to bed and think about that."

"Right!"

"You're not very sympathetic."

"Perhaps sympathy is not my strong suit. You can think from now till Doomsday, but I was not joking when I told your father that Miranda Issell's good name is imperilled. I have been thinking for you as hard as I have ever thought in my life, and I tell you this as my conviction: If you want Miranda to wear that ring you gave her you must slip a less expensive one under it. If you don't the precious symbol will be returned to you, and soon, unless I am utterly mistaken in the young lady."

"Why can't we wait a little? I may get Mother on my side."

"Honestly, Ralph, is that likely?"

"N-no, but I shall have a shot at it."

"I rather fancy your father queered your pitch a bit by his praise of Miranda. If I want a woman to like another woman I abuse her cautiously. Then they stick up for each other. And your mother has chosen Miss Alice Apperton for you."

"I'm in a hole," said Ralph dejectedly. "And I haven't touched bottom yet."

That was Purdie's opinion, but he didn't say so.

II

The young fellow saw his mother next day after breakfast. He found Mrs. Somervell lying upon a sofa in her own room, looking even frailer than usual. It struck him, as he kissed her, that she was like her room. Upon the walls were many water-colour drawings faded in tint. The chintz curtains and chair coverings were faded also. Practically the room had not been touched since she came to Chorley House as a bride. And, as a bride, she had selected delicate colours, soft greys and pale pinks.

She regarded him anxiously.

"Dear Ralph, I am so unhappy about this."

"I know, Mother. And we might be so happy, all of us, if only Father would climb down his absurd pole."

"But he won't—he won't."

"Tell me, dear, what you think about it?"

She answered steadily:

"I don't think that such a marriage would make for your happiness or hers. But then I can't jump barriers. I have respected barriers all my life, Ralph. In a real sense they have made my life easy and pleasant. Perhaps our lives are not intended to be easy and pleasant. I don't know. My ignorance about so much perplexes

me. I suppose I never enjoyed liberty of thought; the wings of my imagination were clipped when I was a child."

He was sitting beside her. He took her hand and caressed it tenderly.

"I can jump barriers, Mother."

"Ah! Our colts used to jump out of the paddocks, but they jumped back in again. They were stable-bred. You and Ruth are like that. It has been a great joy to me that my children loved their home. I can't see you outside the barriers. I can see Mr. Purdie. He is self-dependent. I admire him. But what is meat to him might be poison to you."

He said impatiently:

"You mean, Mother, that you side with Father against me?"

"I am too tired, Ralph, to side even with your father against you, or with you against him. I'm afraid, dear, you have a very feeble mother. I can only pray that things may come right."

She closed her eyes.

He kissed her as he released her hand. She had impressed him. But he dared not say more. He lingered on for a few minutes, talking perfunctorily, trying, indeed, to escape from his own thoughts, wondering if the woman who had borne him knew him better than he knew himself. Presently he left her. As he was descending the stairs he met his father coming up, and paused awkwardly.

"I have just seen Mother," he said. "She looks very frail."

The Colonel replied savagely:

"This is enough to kill her; the sooner you realise that the better."

Ralph found Purdie in the smoking-room, hard at work, with sheets of script littered about him. In a couple of days his friend would leave Chorley House. He was not likely to return as Colonel Somervell's guest. Purdie looked up interrogatively; his hair was tousled and his spectacles awry. He wore a shabby coat, ink-stained, very frayed at the sleeves. His general appearance suggested to Ralph a buccaneer of the pen. To accentuate this impression the journalist flaunted a red tie.

"Anything doing?" he asked.

"Mother is on the fence, Miles."

Purdie flung down his pen, jumped up, shook himself, and nodded his massive head.

"On the fence, is she?"

"Simply because she is not strong enough to take sides. Father thinks this may kill her."

"Told you so, eh?"

"Not a minute ago."

Purdie muttered something about boomerangs, and began to pace the room. In his opinion the Colonel was using unwarrantable pressure. Anyway, the fact that Mrs. Somervell was "on the fence" set him thinking furiously. But he had to admit comparative ignorance of gentlewomen of her ultra-refined type. On general principles, he believed that the women whom he knew best sided with the top dog; they bowed their heads before a winner; they surrendered unconditionally to a conqueror, a primitive instinct. But Mrs. Somervell was not

primitive. Probably her sympathies would lie with the under-dog. He pulled up in front of Ralph.

"Is your mother really ill?"

Ralph answered the question at length. The Puddenhurst doctor was a pal of his, who played golf. Ralph, it appeared, had taken several half-crowns off him, and a considered opinion upon Mrs. Somervell's health. She was not suffering from any organic disease. Her mother, who was still alive, spent many hours on a sofa. Both mother and daughter took any form of trouble lying down. At such times importunate visitors were denied access to the invalids. They enjoyed the conversation of intimate friends only. After a day or two, they arose refreshed, quite capable of dealing with servants who had essayed a rest cure on their own account. Really it came to this, all her life Mrs. Somervell had been the victim of anæmia, due probably to an imperfect digestion. She had observed certain dietary rules since she was fourteen.

"Beastly hard luck on her," concluded Ralph, "but there it is."

"Beastly hard luck on you," thought Purdie. He was wondering whether physical weakness in the mother might be reproduced mentally in the offspring. Ralph was a fine specimen physically, extraordinarily like his sire, but, mentally, he took to a sofa when trouble impended. At such moments, apparently, he relied on others to do his thinking.

Purdie asked an irrelevant question:

"I say, Ralph, what do you do when you lose hounds in the Forest?"

Ralph answered quickly:

"As a rule I go home. I hate a stern chase. If I can't stick at the top of the hunt, I chuck it. But what a rummy thing to ask me."

"You aren't quite at the top of this hunt, are you? Do you propose to chuck it?"

"No."

"Have you made up your mind what to do?"

"I shall have to write a long letter to Miranda. I agree with you about the darling's good name. I must keep away from the Vicarage, but I can see her next Thursday. Between then and now something may happen."

"I think that is likely," said Purdie dryly.

"I don't mean that Father will climb down. He won't. Mother says so. She knows him. He never does climb down, never!"

"But he does. He climbed down yesterday about Miranda. I positively admired his agility. History may repeat itself."

"I wish you would speak plainly."

Purdie shrugged his broad shoulders, and thrust out an uncompromising jaw.

"You force me to assume a serious responsibility. You are asking me to think and act—and act—for you."

"You're a damned sight cleverer than I am. I have enormous faith in you, Miles. You know that."

"Right! I accept this responsibility. I base my advice to you on two facts: Your mother is on the fence. She represents a vis inertiæ which, ultimately, will weigh down the scales. That is fact one. Fact two is this: Your father reverses his considered judgments when conditions change. Most of us do. Let's hark back to the

Preconceived Idea. I formed a wrong judgment on insufficient data. The data are still insufficient, but this time my judgment may be right. Your father cherishes the preconceived idea that no Somervell marries out of his class. If a Somervell did marry out of his class, he would, I believe, accept changed conditions, because, instinctively, he has recognised Miranda for what she is. If she became a Somervell that instinct would gradually assert itself again. Everybody who met Miranda as Mrs. Somervell would be on your side. Public Opinion is, in the end, irresistible. Your mother would fall off the fence because she loves you. Your father would climb down because you are an only son. It is conceivable that you might do without them; it is hardly conceivable, from my knowledge of them, that they could do without you. In fine, if I were in your place—and, by Heaven! I wish I were—I should see Miranda at once, persuade her to marry you, buy a special licence, and put to sea in the very teeth of the storm. Delay, and wind and tide will pile you up on the rocks!"

He spoke with extraordinary energy and vehemence. And, as he spoke, he beheld himself in Ralph's place. He had an enchanting vision of Miranda as his own wife. The vision faded instantly, but a glimpse of Paradise had been vouchsafed him.

Ralph lay back in his chair, stretching out his long legs, mentally, almost derelict, on the rocks, already, of compromise and irresolution. Purdie stirred him to his marrow, but his marrow was anæmic.

"Miranda might not consent to that."

"That is possible. But you would have established yourself with her. She would know, beyond all doubt,

that you wanted her, that you were ready to face all odds for her sake. She adores her father. She might well refuse to marry you without his sanction. If I know him, he will consent. And I will take it upon myself to secure his consent."

Ralph wriggled. Purdie stared at the unhappy lover, trying to read him accurately. Was he, the stronger, dominating a friend against that friend's will, hypnotising him, forcing action upon inaction? Even he shrank from that responsibility. Another consideration obtruded itself. He was the guest of the Colonel. Behind his host's back, he was urging his host's son to flout his father's wishes. He said hastily:

"I must leave this house this morning."

Ralph jumped up, galvanised into activity of mind and body.

"Leave me?"

"I had forgotten that I was your father's guest."

All the fire had gone out of his voice. And he felt strangely inert. Reaction had set in. Why had he come down here? Why had he bogged himself in this quagmire of futility, indecision, and vacillation?

Ralph's pleasant tones fell upon his ears:

"So had I, Miles. Perhaps you are right."

"I know that I am right about that," growled Purdie. He had become angry with himself and angry with Ralph. "If I am summoned to town, your father will speed me on my way very civilly. I'll send a wire to myself from Puddenhurst—at once."

He turned to leave the room.

"Hold hard, Miles! Are you feeling sick with me?"

"I am sorry that I meddled in this affair."

"But—if—if I do what you suggest——?"

Purdie was arrested. He blinked at Ralph, whose tones lacked virility, but who stood before him reassuringly erect.

"Let's scrap suggestions," he replied roughly. "You are on the fence, beside your mother. Come off it! You must advance boldly, or retreat. Which is it?"

"I want Miranda," said Ralph.

"She outweighs everything?" asked Purdie.

"Yes; I shall advance."

"Then I'm your man, and I'll back you through thick and thin."

He held out his hand, which Ralph grasped. Purdie felt himself clutched. And the appeal of weakness to strength became irresistible. It flashed into Purdie's mind that Miranda might be susceptible to the same emotion.

Ralph, however, spoke more firmly.

"Father told me this morning, before breakfast, that he had intended to see Mrs. Merrytree. She is expecting him. But he won't go. Somebody must see her. Will you?"

"If necessary, but why not go yourself?"

"The fact is I promised Father this morning that I would keep away from the Vicarage for a few days. It wasn't much to ask of me, was it? And I—I promised."

"I see."

"It smoothed him down a bit, old chap."

"What am I to say to Mrs. Merrytree?"

At once Ralph became voluble, having devoted much thought to what was really a side issue. Mrs. Merrytree must be told the truth about Miranda's parentage and

her reasons for going into service. Being a good sort, she would hold her tongue. She must be told that an ardent lover would respect the conventions that hedge a vicarage. Upon the following Thursday Ferdinand would meet Miranda in Prospero's studio. Everything could be arranged then. Miranda, meanwhile, would receive a letter.

Purdie listened, not entirely convinced. But he realised that the speaker was hampered by his promises to his father. He agreed to see Mrs. Merrytree. But he stuck to his resolution to leave Chorley House that morning.

III

Before Purdie went to his bedroom, the original plan of campaign had been modified. He told the Colonel that business of importance summoned him not to London but to Cronmouth. The Colonel expressed courteous regret at losing his guest, but he did not urge him to stay. Purdie bespoke a motor in Puddenhurst. Passing through Medbery-Hawthorne and Moscombe he would see both Mrs. Merrytree and Adam Issell. He wanted to talk to Prospero about chintzes and cretonnes. Then he would go on to a comfortable hotel in Cronmouth, or, possibly, stay the night with Boniface, at "The Stag."

Being an old soldier of fortune, he packed his own things. He had almost finished when Ralph appeared.

"I have been writing to Miranda, Miles."

And you want me to deliver the billet?"

"No. I'm hung up. It is a blinkingly difficult letter to write. I've torn up three attempts. It has just struck me that you might see Miranda. Mrs. Merrytree

wouldn't mind. In five minutes you would say what I couldn't write in five years."

"You ask me to ask her to bolt with you?"

Ralph replied with dignity:

"Do you think me a damned fool, Miles?"

"What I think of you, Ralph, is irrelevant."

"I shall ask Miranda to bolt with me next Thursday. I intended to tell her, by letter, exactly what has happened, but I hesitate about shoving down in black and white that my father is a rotter."

"Purge your mind of that; he isn't. Go on!"

"Anyway, he has behaved like a snob."

"I dispute it."

"I can't tell the darling that my father thinks she isn't good enough for me, when, as I said to you before, I know that I'm not good enough for her."

Purdie's face and mind relaxed. Ralph was now at his best, modest, candid, absolutely sincere. When he was driven to use a pen, he generally began by eating it. Ralph added mournfully:

"At the rate I'm travelling, old chap, I shan't have finished the letter by next Thursday."

Purdie laughed.

"All right, Ralph. I'll see Miranda, with Mrs. Merrytree's permission, and give her your dear love and a kiss."

"I wish you would be more serious, Miles."

"My God! man, if you knew how seriously I do take this."

"I beg your pardon."

He smiled, disarmingly. Ralph's smile, so Purdie reflected, was an immeasurable asset. It pierced armour

of triple brass. It must, surely, beguile Fortune herself. It could command an immense salary on the screen.

"Right! You give me a free hand?"

"Of course. What a pal you are!"

"I have never made love as proxy."

"You can do it. I want you to pile it on for me. Tell her I tore up three letters. Let yourself rip for me."

Purdie grinned.

"I'll do my level best."

Ten minutes later he was on his way.

IV

Sitting back in the car, he was whimsically aware that Fate had assigned to him as a friend a strange yokefellow. Fate played such tricks with love and friendship. Weakness imposed itself on strength, and vice versa, both subject to the Law of Compensation. Like and dislike defied analysis. They gibed at synthesis. Purdie's mind was synthetic. He delighted in co-ordination. As a publicist he preached amalgamation of interests seemingly conflicting but really interdependent. He had brought together a group of papers, fused them into one directing force, increasing enormously their potential energy. He had refused to enter Parliament, because he detested party strife, although he loved power. Since the War he had bent his talents to the task of adjusting the differences between privileged and unprivileged. He believed in the aristocracy of intelligence and the survival of the fittest. Cream must rise to the surface.

Was his friend cream or skim-milk?

He glanced at his watch. It was reasonably certain that he would find Mrs. Merrytree at home at 12.30. If

he were asked to stay to luncheon Miranda would wait on him. He couldn't decide whether such service from her would be agreeable or not.

The door of the Vicarage was opened by Kate. Miranda happened to be dressing, but Purdie could not be sure of that. She might have left the Merrytrees.

He was ushered into the prim drawing-room, which didn't displease him. He liked women to be orderly. He inhaled greedily the fragrance of roses, and with it an even more stimulating odour of roast beef. "The cupboard is not bare," he thought. "I shall be asked to luncheon."

Mrs. Merrytree bustled in.

She recognised him at once as Ralph's friend.

"I saw you, Mr. Purdie, in Sloden-Pauncefort. Long before that the Vicar and I had heard of Mr. Miles Purdie."

"I have come to you, Mrs. Merrytree, as a sort of Envoy Extraordinary from Chorley House. You were expecting Colonel Somervell this afternoon. I am here instead."

"Pray sit down."

In a few curt words he enlightened her about her parlourmaid, withholding comment. As succinctly he indicated that civil war was raging between father and son. Mrs. Merrytree interpolated gasps of astonishment and distress. Her rosy face radiated bewilderment. Probably she had never heard a story told so exhaustively and concisely in so short a time. It left her breathless.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Her tone was full of sympathy. After a pause, with an odd note of triumph, the loyal wife exclaimed:

"The Vicar was right. He refused to believe that Mary was the daughter of a nobleman."

"Her father *is* noble, Mrs. Merrytree."

"Poor girl! Poor young man! What will happen?"

Purdie shrugged his shoulders, intimating that the issue of the romantic affair lay upon the knees of the gods. Meanwhile Ferdinand had promised his sire that Miranda should be left in maiden meditation at the Vicarage.

"She is still with you?"

"Oh, yes. She had better remain here. I respect her the more, Mr. Purdie, because she entered my service, not for a whim, but to help her father."

"You *are* the right sort," thought Purdie. He said aloud:

"Ralph has asked me to see her, with your kind permission. He tried to write a letter, but he found it difficult. He will meet her next Thursday at her father's house."

"You know Mary?"

"Not as Mary; as Miranda, yes."

"Will you stay to luncheon? I think it would be kinder to see her after luncheon, and, if you can spare the time, after her own dinner."

"Thanks. That is very thoughtful of you."

She took him round her garden, talking about it, but making sharp transits to "Mary." All that she said about her parlourmaid was illuminating. Purdie wondered what Mrs. Merrytree thought of Ralph. He wanted to glance at a thumb-nail sketch of him. She might lack

humour, he decided, but not shrewdness. When "Mary's" name cropped up again between the cabbages and gooseberry bushes, he marked an inflection of sadness. He said abruptly:

"You think this affair won't end happily?"

"I wouldn't say so for the world."

"But you think it," he persisted. "And why?"

"Ralph is dependent on his father."

"Not to mention his forefathers."

"That is back of my mind, Mr. Purdie. We shall have no apples this year."

They lunched together. The Vicar was from home, pursuing some rare variety of skipper. Mary betrayed no self-consciousness when she saw Purdie. She waited admirably, but he kept his eyes off her. And he talked so easily to Mrs. Merrytree that the girl supposed them to be old acquaintances. She vanished after she had brought coffee.

"We will give her half an hour, Mr. Purdie."

As the minutes passed, he became conscious of nervousness. Mrs. Merrytree begged him to light his pipe. Mary would come back, after her own dinner, to clear away. And then an interview of five or ten minutes could take place without arousing suspicion in "me-an'-Kate."

"You keep your servants, Mrs. Merrytree?"

"Yes; why do you ask that?"

"For the pleasure of telling you that such consideration as yours deserves faithful service."

She beamed at him, thinking him less ugly. But she reflected that a red-headed, freckled war correspondent could hardly be romantic. What message would he de-

liver? How would he deliver it? Secretly, she was angry with Ralph for employing a go-between. Soaring far above Medbery-Hawthorne, quite forgetting that she was the daughter of a respectable solicitor, she attempted to change herself into a young and ardent lover. Having achieved this feat, she blushed inwardly. Few men are aware of what middle-aged women can imagine.

Presently, Purdie found himself alone in the drawing-room, with a queer, quaking sensation about his solar plexus.

"I feel as if I were going over the top," he thought.

Miranda came in quietly, shut the door, and advanced. Her cheeks were pale; distress lurked in her eyes; but her bearing was assured.

V

He held her hand for an instant, and noticed that it was cold.

"I came here to see you, Miranda. Ralph sends his love."

"What has happened, Mr. Purdie?"

He made her sit beside him on a sofa, and told the story once more, almost in the same words, but with a softer inflection of the voice. Throughout the narrative her eyes rested gravely on his. She blushed vividly when she heard of the part played by the Vicar. When he had finished, her quickness of wit astounded him.

"Did you write that paragraph?"

"Yes; I did."

"And sent the paper to Mrs. Merrytree?"

"Of course."

She remained pensively silent. Then she said slowly:

"Was Colonel Somervell nice because he thought me Lady M.?"

"Emphatically not. He could see how nice you are because he couldn't see you as a parlourmaid."

She assimilated this with slight puckering of the brows. Then she said naïvely:

"He must be a very funny old gentleman."

Purdie was delighted.

"You have described him exactly."

"I was so anxious to please him. If he thought me nice, if he liked me—and he did—why is he behaving so funnily?"

"Why indeed? To answer that question, Miranda, adequately, we must survey, you and I, the social history of England, and we haven't time to do it."

"No. But I understand. According to Daddy, parlourmaids, if they do their duty, are as important as Prime Ministers."

"That is perfectly true. But funny old gentlemen potter about lawns and paddocks; they don't dive into wells."

"I know, Mr. Purdie, that parlourmaids are not held in high esteem. Aunt Barbara rubbed that in. I suppose that Aunt Barbara and Colonel Somervell think alike."

"They may."

She continued gravely:

"Of course, I realised long ago that what Daddy said and thought was the expression of the few. Colonel Somervell belongs to the many, whose opinions are worthless."

"Miranda, I wish Colonel Somervell could hear you."

"Anyway, you have been a wonderful friend. You made Ralph's father like me."

Purdie said with enthusiasm:

"You are a perfect darling to say that."

"And he can't help loving Ralph, can he?"

Purdie replied guardedly:

"Colonel Somervell sets an inordinate valuation upon everything that belongs to him."

She exclaimed triumphantly:

"Then he'll come round."

"He's very thin, Miranda."

She laughed, thoroughly at ease. But, immediately she became solemn, asking anxiously:

"What did Ralph tell you to tell me?"

Purdie couldn't answer this off-hand. Ralph, being Ralph, had neglected to send a definite message. He had trusted to his clever friend to say what was fitting. Purdie rose to the situation. Miranda asked for a message. A message must be delivered.

"Naturally, you want me to speak for him?"

"I do. You are a splendid friend. I do believe that he could say to you what he wants to say to me. I know that he has sent me a lovely message, and I want to hear every word of it."

Purdie remained silent.

"You haven't forgotten it?"

"I must get it just right, Miranda."

"I'm simply dying to hear it."

What would be a "lovely" message? Purdie felt himself challenged. Miranda's eyes were sparkling with anticipation. Obviously she expected something out of the ordinary. With a sense of shame he remembered

what he had said to other women utterly different from her. With them he had not minced words. The baser sort were impatient of phrase-making. They warmed quickly to a bold lover. Never in his life had he attempted to make love to a girl as innocent and as intelligent as Miranda. Suddenly, temptation assailed him. If he told her the truth, if he drew a faithful picture of her lover, exhibiting him as torn in two by irresolution, unable even to write half a dozen words, paralysed by paternal thunderings, crouching "on a fence"—if he did all this would her eyes sparkle? And then, having done this, rolling the idol in the dust, might he not turn his own mastery of words to rare account. With what overwhelming conviction he could say to her: "This charming fellow is not a man but a mannikin. He can't fight for you, because the sinews of his mind are feeble. Tear him out of your heart!"

The temptation passed as swiftly as it had come. Loyalty to his friend brimmed over. He smiled at Miranda, she smiled confidingly at him.

"Ralph told me to let myself rip."

"Did he?" She hesitated, blushing faintly as she whispered: "Do!"

"He wants you to believe that you come absolutely first, that you are the greatest thing in the world. He will stick at nothing to get you. His people are dear to him, but you are infinitely dearer. For your sake, he will climb up to you, tear his star out of the skies. Because it is dark now, you shine with brighter ray."

"Did he say all that?"

He pressed on, evading her question:

"Ralph begs you to cast fear and doubt out of your

heart. If he were here, he would say nothing, nothing at all. He would take you in his arms and you would know that strength always wins in the end."

She said slowly:

"It's a lovely message. Thank you ever so much."

She stood up and so did he. She held out both her hands.

"Ralph is lucky."

"He is."

She read something in his eyes, undisguised admiration, perhaps, as she exclaimed ingenuously:

"Oh, but I don't mean what you mean. He is lucky to have such a friend—and so am I—and so is Daddy."

"I am going to your father now."

He raised her hands and kissed them.

"That kiss was from me—from your friend."

"I shall try to be worthy of your friendship."

CHAPTER XIII

RALPH TEMPORIZES

I

SOMETHING did happen between Saturday and the following Thursday; nothing of importance in itself; a small incident that may bring about or avert—catastrophe. A "jam" in a lumber camp, only to be broken up by dynamite, is often caused by a small log drifting idly across a stream.

Ralph went out hunting on Monday, riding a mare full of corn and very fresh. When the pack was laid on to a big buck, the young man soon found himself at the top of the hunt with his mare almost out of hand. He decided, however, that a long slope would take the steam out of her. As he breasted the top of the slope, he could see the buck some three hundred yards ahead of the leading hounds racing along at top speed. To live with them meant taking risks in high heather which hid rabbit-holes and ruts. He pressed on.

Half way across the heather, the mare plunged into a deep rut and fell. Ralph was pitched on to his head. For the moment he was stunned. When he recovered consciousness he found his head in Alice Apperton's lap. The hunt was over for him and her. And the mare was lame. Alice ministered to him. He soon discovered that his right arm, below the elbow, was out of action, although no bones were broken.

"I'm all right," he declared. "You nip on, Alice."

"Nonsense; I shall see you home."

Thanks to her, a good Samaritan took Ralph to Chorley House in a motor. Alice led back the mare. He was much touched by her unselfishness. She had sacrificed a day's sport for him. He went to bed with a racking headache and remained there two days. The mare recovered as quickly as he did.

The accident, therefore, to man and horse, may be dismissed as negligible. The incident, in its relation to this narrative, was not so. At the moment when action became necessary, Ralph's physical energies were paralysed. The issue of the battle of Waterloo might have been different had Napoleon been physically strong. Ralph lay in bed sick and sore. Of course, he was "fussed over" by his mother and sister. And the Colonel, for the moment, ceased to play the Roman father. It is likely that he said a word in season to his wife: "Be extra nice to the boy, what?" With ministering hands hovering about his pillow Ralph began to reconsider the position. Purdie was in London, busy with his own affairs. Purdie had written a curt note:

I have done my best for you. Miranda remains at the Vicarage. You will see her on Thursday. Then you must sail in, clap on all canvas, and win through. By the way, you owe me a fiver.

"Clap on all canvas!" Not too easy a job when a mariner is unable to hold a pen in the right hand. He had to entreat his sister to write a note to Miranda, stiffly worded by a maiden who was not sure in her own mind whether or not she was breaking the Fifth Commandment. Miss Miranda Issell was, however, informed

that Captain Somervell had been slightly hurt in the hunting-field and could not write for himself. Beyond this the gentle but obstinate Ruth refused to go. She knew, of course, that her handsome brother had engaged himself to a parlourmaid; and her preconceived idea of a parlourmaid alienated sympathy. Mrs. Somervell had whispered: "This unhappy affair will adjust itself if we are all kind and patient."

Ralph was beginning to share that opinion. He wanted Miranda desperately, so he told himself, but he must consider his kind people. Naturally old Miles, with all his cleverness and resource, was unable to understand them. How could he? Rushing things generally ended in a bad "toss." Every bone in his aching body testified to that.

Accordingly, after two sleepless nights, he decided to see Miranda on Thursday, as had been arranged, and to talk with her quietly. He simply wasn't "up" to clapping on sail. He would motor into Moscombe, and the darling would be even "nicer" to him than his own dear people.

II

Miranda, meanwhile, had received Ruth Somervell's formal note which aroused lively apprehensions in a tender heart. She took it to Mrs. Merrytree.

"Can I go to him?"

"My dear——!"

The tone conveyed everything. Not, perhaps, till that moment did Miranda realize the width of the social gulf yawning between a parlourmaid and Colonel Somervell's son.

"If he were dying——?"

"But he is not dying."

The kind lady went on maternally. She soon succeeded in calming Miranda, who smiled derisively as she glanced again at Ruth's note.

"His sister doesn't seem to feel affectionately towards me, does she?"

The artless question worried Mrs. Merrytree, too honest a woman to dissemble. But it revealed, illuminatingly, Miranda's astounding ignorance of conventions.

"Ruth Somervell hasn't met you, child."

"But what have they said to her?"

Mrs. Merrytree declined to guess. Her silence quickened Miranda's sense of humour.

"I must try not to imagine what they said."

"You are a very wise girl. At your age never imagine disagreeable things."

This, however, may be accepted as a counsel of perfection. Miranda burnt Ruth's letter, and within a few hours Mrs. Merrytree, who called at Chorley House, was able still further to reassure her parlourmaid. Ralph was little the worse for a heavy fall, and likely to be in the saddle again before the week was out. Miranda mustn't worry.

Miranda didn't.

But the note had upset her. No inordinate claim upon her imagination was needed to emphasize the fact of the veiled hostility of her lover's sister portrayed to her as the gentlest of damsels.

"Little Ruth will love you, darling."

She decided, then and there, that the note was a straw indicating the strength of the current against her. On

the other hand, if her lover was encountering serious opposition the "lovely" message delivered by Purdie filled her with pride and gladness. So she went about her work still happy, counting the lagging minutes yawning between Wednesday and Thursday, fearing only that her beloved might not be able to keep his appointment.

When she reached her father's house, Ralph had not arrived. Aunt Barbie was in her kitchen, father and daughter met alone in the studio. Within two minutes Miranda guessed that Purdie had talked to her sire as convincingly as usual. The Sage kissed her tenderly, murmuring, as he stroked her cheek:

"My little ladybird seems to have a gallant lover. If I am not mistaken in him I shall be justified in giving you to him even if Colonel Somervell refuses his consent."

"Daddy dear, do you really feel like that? How splendid of you!"

"But it all depends on him, Miranda. His friend, Mr. Purdie, pleaded the young man's case vehemently. Ah, well! true love is all-conquering; it surmounts every obstacle."

"Yes," she replied happily. "Ralph sent me a message through Mr. Purdie. I—I remember every word of it. Shall—shall I repeat it to you?"

He nodded, smiling at her, as she delivered the message word by word. When she hid her blushing face on his shoulder, he said heartily:

"He will tear his star out of the skies. Strength does win in the end."

As the words left his lips the bell tinkled.

Ralph came in, carrying his right arm in a sling.

Otherwise he looked as one might expect a lover to look after a severe shaking-up. Miranda flew to him, kissed him, and asked how he did. Adam Issell glanced at the pair. Ralph might be pale, but Miranda had colour enough for two. After a few phrases, the Sage drifted out of the studio.

The lovers were alone.

III

At first, the talk (with interludes) meandered round the situation. Past and present engrossed a pair of tongues. Miranda, naturally, expected details, demanding the truth. What did Colonel Somervell say? She suspected that Purdie might have expurgated his text.

Ralph passed through this ordeal fairly well, although he ventured to take exception to Miranda's repeated adjective "funny" as applied to the Colonel.

"He didn't seem funny to me, dearest."

"But a man eating his own words is funny, Ralph."

"We're fairly up against it, darling."

"That makes it tremendously exciting."

Ralph nodded. He had come, by slow degrees, to the jumping-off place. He knew that he must dive headlong into the future.

"I've been thinking things over," he began, tentatively. Miranda marked a change of tone. But she was reflecting that her lover had not quite recovered from his fall. He sat limp in his chair.

"Yes?"

"I've had time to think a bit. That toss was an object lesson of how not to do it. Purdie is a thruster. I don't blame him."

"Blame him?"

"I mean, you know," he picked his way warily, mindful of ruts and rabbit-holes, "that he has to be in his line of business. His motto is 'Push!' "

Having progressed as far as this, he realized that Miranda's intelligent eyes were fixed upon his. They seemed uncannily alert. He continued with slight nervousness:

"My people have been most awfully decent to me. I have to consider them."

"Of course you have."

He brightened perceptibly.

"I think they'll come round in time. I promised Father to keep away from Medbery-Hawthorne."

"So Mr. Purdie told me."

"I fancy that Purdie, being Purdie, thought me a fool to give that promise, but Father was thinking of your good name."

"Was he?" She considered this gravely, adding: "I can take care of that myself."

"Anyway, Miranda, looking at the thing from every point of view, what is to be gained by haste?"

"I—I don't know."

"As soon as I can get to town I must make inquiries about India. Some fellows manage to marry on their pay in India. I must find out how it's done. I can't stick the idea of your roughing it."

"But I shouldn't mind roughing it with you."

"And you're barely twenty."

"I am roughing it now, Ralph."

She was puzzled not so much by his words as by his manner. She couldn't reconcile that manner with the

message which still thrilled her pulses. "If he were here, he would say nothing at all, he would take you in his arms...." Surely he was saying a great deal. And again: "He will stick at nothing to get you." But he was sticking——! She continued softly:

"Strength wins in the end."

He looked up, obviously puzzled. But he couldn't have forgotten. She went on:

"I have thought of that so often."

"Who said it?"

"Who said it?" she repeated.

"Is it a famous quotation?"

"You said it, Ralph."

"Did I? When?"

"It was part of your message to me."

By this time they were both puzzled, each attempting to read the other. Pitching on one's head is apt to drive out of it messages composed by the messenger. Ralph remembered vaguely that Purdie had been instructed to deliver a message to Miranda. What had he said to her? He asked ingenuously:

"Part of what Miles Purdie said to you?"

"Yes: you—you remember the message, don't you?"

"Not altogether."

She winced and blinked under the conviction that the message had come from Purdie. And at the moment of delivery she had been surprised, because Ralph had not the gift of words. In a sort of dream she heard her lover saying:

"I told Purdie to—to——" he ended triumphantly: "I remember, I told him to let himself rip. Did he?"

"Yes; he did."

"Good old Miles! Tell me what he said."

But she couldn't; the disappointment was too poignant. In silence, she shook her head, wondering why it remained so disconcertingly cool and clear. Ralph went on in his pleasant voice:

"Purdie said that strength wins in the end. Well, it doesn't always. There is such a thing as finesse."

"And you haven't got it," thought Miranda. But, immediately, heart rebelled against head. Heart whispered that Purdie had given words, delightful words, to a friend; and he had given them generously. Purdie must know his own friend better than she did.

"You sent me some message?" she asked.

"I sent you my love."

"Nothing more?"

"Wasn't that enough, darling? It meant everything. I had torn up three letters. Purdie knew what I wanted to say."

"I see."

Undismayed by the trouble in her eyes, not interpreting it aright, he began to talk of the future. She could hardly listen with attention. Every phrase seemed to reveal him in a startlingly new light, as a marker of time, an apostle of expediency. All that was adventurous in her threw into sharper relief his hesitations and procrastinations. And, as he spoke, he seemed to go sinking back into the soft cushions of his chair. Her lively fancy carried her even further. She decided that she was meeting a new Ralph underground, a pallid, tepid, Cave-dweller. When he had finished, she said dully:

"I suppose you are right."

"I haven't a doubt about that, darling. In a few weeks we shall know where we are. Your father is going to win this prize. That will make an immense difference."

"Will it? Daddy thinks he has a good chance. Of course, he's an optimist—only the people who have nothing can afford to be optimists."

He tried to digest this, uneasily conscious that his carefully considered words had provoked little from her save monosyllables. Still she looked pensively sweet, more adorable than ever.

"I can't think of myself at all," he affirmed.

Miranda nodded. Ralph said with greater energy:

"You must give Mrs. Merrytree notice. Have you done so?"

"But why should I? The situation remains the same, although there is light ahead. I am saving Daddy money; I am needed here. Like you"—was her tone derisive?—"I can't think of myself."

He answered with slight irritation:

"In this case, my dearest girl, I ask you to think of me."

"I *am* thinking of you, Ralph."

She dared not add that her thoughts of him were becoming nebulous.

"If it is a question of money, if a few pounds make such a difference to your father, why not let me help you? I should love to do it."

"I—I couldn't take money from you. Daddy would be so humiliated if I did."

"I hate the idea of my wife being a parlourmaid."

"You hate it? I understand that your people hate

it. But you——! You told me that you had got rid of your blinkers."

"And so I have."

"But you haven't," she urged gently. "After all, I am serving others. I am rather proud of it. It just happens to be my job for a few weeks. It would please me ever so much if you felt proud of me, because I am doing what I can to the best of my ability."

Did she know that she was trying him "high"?

"I'm not proud of your position with Mrs. Merrytree. It means that I can't see you except on Thursday. It means, also, that later on disagreeable people may say disagreeable things."

"And you would care?"

"Of course I should care, loving you as I do."

But she remained firm in her decision to remain a parlourmaid till her sire's fortunes mended or another "job" presented itself. The stronger will prevailed. Finally Ralph remembered that he was alone with a beguiling young woman, and not making the most of his opportunities. He became the ardent lover.

"All will come right in the end," he assured her for at least the third time.

"You mean," she smiled at him, "that your will to conquer is stronger than your father's?"

"Yes; I do."

She sighed.

"Ah! At Chorley House the odds are three to one against you, Ralph."

We leave him kissing her.

Presently Adam Issell came back, and soon afterwards Ralph took his leave.

"What have you settled?" asked the Sage. He was a-quiver with expectation, having driven from his breast a small demon of jealousy, whose place could be filled with happy confidences. He told himself that he had educated Miranda for this. He had trained her to know the right man when she beheld him.

"Nothing," answered Miranda.

The eager father thought: "This is a shock." He stared at a face no longer brightened by colour. Possibly mental anæmia is contagious. Miranda felt as if some vampire bat had drained from her veins the vital fluid. She had meant to hide from her father tormenting thoughts and apprehensions. Alone in her room at the Vicarage she intended to confront them valiantly. But the love in Prospero's eyes was overwhelming. He led her to the shabby sofa and sat down beside her, holding her hand.

"Something has gone wrong, child. Tell me!"

"I—I have told you."

Between these two existed that subtle understanding which mocks at speech. Adam Issell knew instantly that the lover had exhibited weakness instead of strength.

"You needn't tell me, child. I can guess."

"But he loves me, Daddy, and I love him."

"Ah—love! What is it? Who can measure it? It is too often profaned. And it lies in the heart not on the lips. If—if, Miranda, you have been mistaken in him, perhaps you have been mistaken in yourself. After all life is just a clash between one's egotism and one's ethics. And we shrink from admitting our mistakes to ourselves." He paused, adding softly: "Perhaps this

fall has weakened him for the moment. That message——!"

"It was not from him, Daddy."

"Not from him?"

"Mr. Purdie invented it, every word of it. He—he," her voice faltered, "just said what Ralph ought to have said. And I can't bear it."

She didn't break down. He might have dealt soothingly with tears; her self-composure perplexed him. There was something arid about it, desiccating. Obviously pride in a lover had been humbled. And with it pride in herself.

"You must bear it," he suggested quietly. "I think of you as a child, but really you are a woman with powers of analysis and detachment. Call upon these to help you. This trouble, this misunderstanding may be temporary. Love is worthless till it is tested. I don't dare say more."

"Thank you ever so much for what you have said. I will go to Aunt Barbie."

"By the way, she knows. I had to tell her. I won't repeat what she said to me, because she is sure to say it all over again to you."

A faint smile flickered about the corners of Miranda's mouth as she passed into the kitchen, where the presiding genius greeted her austerely. Her first words, after she had kissed her niece, were portentous: "I can't congratulate you, child, upon this preposterous engagement. I have done what I could. I have held my tongue about it."

"Not to Father."

"Ah! He has told you what I said to him."

"No. I expect he thought you would like doing that yourself."

Miss Issell looked uncompromisingly prim.

"I don't know the young man, Miranda, but I know about him. He belongs to the leisure-loving class which I dislike. Your father hinted at opposition. Can you expect anything else? I see nothing but trouble ahead of you. All this comes of educating a girl above her proper station. Will you shell some of those peas? I am preparing a nice supper for you."

Miranda began to shell the peas. Somehow Aunt Barbie impressed her, arousing curiosities.

"Why do you dislike the leisured class?"

According to the Sage true wisdom is as much a matter of the apt moment as the apt word. If the course of true love had run more smoothly Miranda might not have asked the question. Miss Issell answered it according to her lights:

"Love of ease breeds selfishness. This young man is selfish. He has taken a fancy to you. He wants you regardless of consequences. Perhaps if he had seen me, he might have hesitated."

Miranda laughed.

"You know, Auntie, my co-workers at the Vicarage think as you do about all men."

"And they are more than half right."

"Ralph Somervell may belong to the leisure-loving class, but he has to work hard."

"And he'll have to work harder yet if he marries you. But I suppose it's none of my business."

She closed her firm lips, opening them again to talk of something else. From being impressed Miranda

became depressed. Common sense—if it were common sense—fell chillingly upon romance. In fine, she was beholding herself for the first time in her life as a stirrer-up of strife, and perhaps at the same time she was realizing her strength, that curious grip of facts which is given to so few. Confronted by facts, increasing prices, dwindling custom, she had marched unswervingly into service. Most girls of her age would have hesitated, waited a little longer. She had not waited an hour. Now, once again, she felt stripped of illusions. But this time she had to wait, because she was not quite sure of her facts, because they eluded her grasp.

Presently Aunt Barbie, pausing from her culinary labours, said abruptly:

"There is no reason why you shouldn't come home again."

"Because I am engaged?"

"No; because your father is doing ever so much better. Amos can please Moscombe."

"You object to my marriage with one of the leisure-loving class but you encourage me to come home and do practically nothing because I'm an Issell and in service. I have tried to see myself as an Issell and failed, but service agrees with me."

"I draw the line between service and servitude. I am in service; you are in servitude. I regard you as a menial."

"Because I am shelling peas for you?"

"I refuse to bandy words with you, Miranda, because you take after your father. I am practical; he isn't. Because he isn't practical, you are a parlourmaid. Be-

cause you are practical, you have engaged yourself to a young gentleman who won't marry you."

Stung by this, Miranda retorted sharply:

"You don't know him, Aunt Barbie; you have no right to say that."

Miss Issell said calmly:

"We shall all be wiser six months hence; I repeat, being practical and taking life as I find it, not as you see it in dreams, this young gentleman won't marry you."

CHAPTER XIV

THE COLONEL GOES TO MOSCOMBE

I

RALPH returned to Chorley House well pleased with himself. Being still desperately in love it is hardly fair to affirm that he was not quite so pleased with Miranda. There had been—*something!* Possibly the darling might be worrying about his fall, which would be just like her. And how upsetting for her to reflect that she was not exactly welcome by the members of his family, who, in due time, would "climb down." But, apart from such considerations, the lover had missed spontaneity of emotion. Up till now he had thrilled her even as she had thrilled him. At the end of their long talk, she had acquiesced in all he said—without thrills. Yes; he had noticed a lack of response.

This did not worry him too much, not enough, for example, to interfere with an excellent dinner. Also, for which he was truly grateful, his people left him alone. The Colonel may have guessed that he had been to Moscombe, but he asked no questions.

Next morning, a Friday, hounds met near Puddenhurst. Ralph was unable to ride with his right arm in a sling, but he walked to the meet with his mother and enjoyed a talk with Alice Apperton, who looked at her best "outside" a horse. The young man met everywhere

kind eyes and kind inquiries. Obviously the Merrytrees had not babbled. Nobody guessed that he was engaged to a parlourmaid. That amazing fact would have caused more than a ripple of excitement in the hunting-field where, when hounds are not running, Gossip is in full cry.

A buck had been harboured in a distant enclosure, so hounds and followers trotted away. Mother and son sat down to enjoy a glorious morning in early August. As likely as not the buck might take a line running near them, in which case they would see some of the hunt. Sport, in all its phases, was almost the sole topic of conversation amongst the Somervells, and Ralph talked with animation about the new "entry," five couple of young hounds bought at an enormous price. Mrs. Somervell, a trained listener, nodded her head. She had discovered long ago that this was sufficient. It kept the men going nicely, and, meanwhile, she could think of other matters.

When Ralph checked, and was leisurely casting his thoughts, his mother said gently:

"Did you see Miranda Issell yesterday?"

"Yes; I did."

"Ah! I hope, my dear, that you and she are not contemplating anything volcanic?"

Ralph squeezed her arm reassuringly:

"Now, don't you worry, Mother, about that. We're not fools. We mean to simmer. I can wait, and so can she."

Mrs. Somervell sighed.

Ralph, still squeezing a soft arm, said impulsively:

"If you and Father only knew how exactly right she is——!"

"But is she right for you, Ralph? Will you talk to me a little about her?"

"Rather! I'd sooner talk about her than—hunt."

"She doesn't hunt. What have you in common with her?"

"Everything," he replied enthusiastically.

"Is she keen about games, tennis, golf, cricket—all the things that interest you when you are not hunting?"

"She doesn't play games, poor little dear! How could she? She's read a lot."

"Have you, Ralph?"

"N-no. She knows about pictures, and all that sort of thing."

"And you don't."

Ralph eyed his mother uneasily:

"What are you getting at, Mother?"

"You tell me you have everything in common with her, but it seems to me that what interests you can't interest her. That is a pity. It makes marriage difficult after the honeymoon."

Mrs. Somervell said no more. Ralph, sensible that he had not shone as a conversationalist, remained silent. Presently the toot of a distant horn made him jump up.

"I believe they're coming this way. What luck!"

He became more excited when the hunted buck crossed below them. Ralph joined the field, running with them. Mrs. Somervell returned to Chorley House. She didn't see her son again till luncheon, when he arrived hot and happy.

"I've had a topping morning. That buck was a

'ringer,' and I saw as much of the fun as anybody else. I shall be out next Monday, Mother."

"But you spoke of going to London?"

"Yes; but London can wait."

The Colonel, helping himself to cold salt beef at the sideboard, chuckled: "The waiting game," he reflected, "is our game."

II

A few days passed. On the Monday the Somervell household was plunged into a whirlpool of excitement. Lord Bisterne wired from London, saying that he wished to spend twenty-four hours with his cousin. He arrived on the Tuesday, a thin spare man, evidently in failing health, and, after dinner, spent two hours alone with the Colonel. He left on Wednesday morning in his car. As he had not visited his kinsman since the death of his two sons, this unexpected appearance provoked curiosity.

"It must mean something," said Ralph to his mother.

What it meant was revealed to Ralph shortly after the great man's departure. Ralph was summoned to the smoking-room, where he found the Colonel restlessly pacing the carpet. He stared hard at his son when he came in and motioned him to a chair. Then he said, hoarsely:

"Bisterne told me a distressing piece of news. Poor fellow! His number is up."

"I'm most awfully sorry, Father."

"And so am I."

Both men spoke the exact truth. The Colonel, after blowing his nose with unnecessary violence, continued mournfully:

"There's organic trouble. He concealed nothing from

me. He told me that he was a tired old man and ready to go. He may live at the outside a year, if he takes extraordinary care of himself. But he refuses to do that. He'll carry on till he drops. He has put his house in order."

The Colonel paused. Then he began again in a firmer voice:

"He has left everything practically to me. God knows I don't want to step into his shoes. I prefer my comfortable slippers. But the property is bigger than I thought and free from encumbrance. He advises me to sell a lot of the land. He would do so himself, but the worry of it is too much. I have never felt so sorry for a man in all my life. To lose both his sons—! And he was very nice about you, Ralph. But—but I—I didn't give you away."

"I understand, Father."

"If I had, he—he might have gone back to London instead of to Bisterne. He told me that he shouldn't leave Bisterne again. He has settled everything. It—it would be a damned shame to unsettle him."

"Yes; it would."

The Colonel's tone brightened.

"We'll leave it at that then—hay?"

"I suppose we must."

The Colonel may have been aware that he was exercising great pressure. And if so we may be sure that he believed that he was acting in obedience to the dictates of conscience. He concluded solemnly:

"Young men do rash things. Anything rash on your part at such a moment might—a—precipitate a crisis."

"You have made that perfectly plain."

"Then there is nothing more to be said."

Ralph retreated to the Forest.

How right he had been! The cheerful thought fortified him, although he was not enraptured with a waiting game. If he had taken Purdie's advice, at this moment he might be married. And Bisterne might be dead. Spring a tremendous surprise on a fellow with some beastly organic disease and he might fall in his tracks! Could he have enjoyed a honeymoon with Miranda when the head of the family was lying stiff and cold in the family vault? And the honeymoon would have had to be done on the cheap.

These reflections gave place to others. Miranda must be told the truth about poor Bisterne. He had received that morning a letter from her evidently scribbled in a hurry, saying that she was not going to Moscombe on Thursday. Such a man as Purdie might have suspected a vital reason lying under such an abstention. Miranda, indeed, still a victim of uneasy days and restless nights, shrank from meeting her lover till she had ordered a perplexed mind. Unwilling to hurt him, she added a postscript: "I have to 'stay in.'" Ralph accepted this. It served to fortify his conclusion that he, the man, was wiser than the maid. It was quite impossible to see the future Lady Bisterne as bondslave to the daughter of a solicitor.

He returned to Chorley House and spoilt several sheets of note-paper before he dispatched the following billet:

DARLING MIRANDA,—What beastly luck! I particularly wanted to see you to-morrow to tell you something of great importance. My cousin, Lord Bisterne, has been here. He tells my father—this is strictly between ourselves—that he cannot expect to live more than a few months. He has settled up his affairs, poor

old chap! My father says—and of course I agree with him—that it would be wicked to do anything that might unsettle him. You know what I mean, dearest. And it is a big property, but I don't care a hang about that. All the same it's a stone cold fact that although you aren't pretty Lady M. you may be pretty Lady B. some day. And it would be a sell—wouldn't it?—to find oneself with a title and nothing to keep it up with. So you see, we have, *in the interests* of others, to be very patient and careful. You know what I'd like to do, if I had a free hand, don't you? Can't you change your mind about giving Mrs. Merrytree notice? Do, please.

All my love, and many, many kisses. We shall meet to-morrow week. I'm marking time about India. I don't want to lug you out there. The climate is simply awful on a delicate complexion.—Your own, RALPH.

Miranda received this epistle on Thursday morning. She read it and re-read it many times. Me-an'-Kate noticed that "Mary" received two letters. The other was from her father. He had been summoned to London by Purdie.

I cannot doubt (he wrote) that this is the beginning of the end of Moscombe. A new life is opening up to me, and I feel years younger. Mr. Purdie gives no details, but I have the most amazing confidence in him, and I shall place myself unreservedly in his hands. I will write again as soon as I have seen him. He has asked me to dine with him on Thursday night. . . .

III

After breakfast, on this particular Thursday, the Colonel had a word with his son.

"You went to Moscombe last Thursday, Ralph. Are you going to-day?"

"No."

The curt monosyllable secretly pleased the old soldier. From it he drew conclusions not, perhaps, justifiable. The boy had behaved well. He hadn't sulked. He had promised to keep away from Medbery-Hawthorne. The

Colonel possessed an ancient stock of maxims, which, when he spoke at committee meetings, were not the least valuable parts of his speech. Amongst these might be found "Second thoughts are best." On second thoughts, he regretted a too hasty determination not to see Miranda's father. A sage might establish his claim to wisdom by seeing eye to eye with a man of the world upon such a vexed question as marriage between two extremely young persons who, admittedly, had been swept off their feet by that rascal Cupid. He said genially: "If you are not going to Moscombe, Ralph, I may motor over there myself this afternoon."

"To—to see Miranda?"

"To see her father."

Ralph smiled at his sire. The obvious reason inundated his mind. The veteran was "climbing down." If he met Miranda's father, he would slide rapidly to the bottom of the pole. No man of intelligence could withstand the whimsical charm of Adam Issell. Ralph said warmly:

"This is splendid of you, Father."

"Well, well; I have never shirked my duty. It is my duty to meet Mr. Issell, and I shall be civil to him."

"Of course you will."

The Colonel left it at that. Since poor Bisterne's visit, he had adopted, without any pose, a slightly more urbane manner. He was quite unconscious of "understudying" the head of the family, but his wife, not his son, had marked a subtle difference in him. *Noblesse oblige!* As a young man he could remember resenting the reticencies of his elders. Now he fully appreciated another golden maxim: "Least said soonest mended."

Accordingly, he held his tongue.

At half-past three, that afternoon, the Colonel's car was left at a garage in Moscombe. The Colonel, in the trimmest of blue serge suits, approached Issell's shop. Like Purdie, he halted in front of the show-window, blinking at the wares exposed therein. Amos had not been idle. As a window-dresser, who knew his Moscombe, he had succeeded beyond expectation in dazzling the eyes of the trippers. Wall-papers that might well evoke "hiccups" challenged the attention and interest of all foot passengers. Young horses shied half across the High Street when they beheld the kaleidoscopic display.

The Colonel, still blinking, entered the shop.

Amos received him cheerfully.

"Beautiful afternoon, sir."

The Colonel assented.

"Is Mr. Issell in?"

"No, sir. Mr. Issell is in London. In his absence, sir, I shall be 'appy to show you anything you may want."

"I want to see Mr. Issell. I have come some distance to see him."

With difficulty he concealed his annoyance from this smirking counter-jumper.

"Miss Issell is in the studio, sir."

The Colonel naturally supposed that Amos was speaking of Miranda. He hesitated. But, being a true Somervell and a Churchman, he was prepared to recognize in Issell's absence and Miranda's presence *something* which might indicate the finger of omnipotence. To talk paternally with Miranda allured him.

"I will see Miss Issell," he declared firmly.

"Certainly, sir. This way, please."

Amos walked to the studio door, opened it, and exclaimed loudly:

"A gentleman to see you, miss."

The Colonel entered the studio; Amos closed the door. Facing the veteran, staring at him crossly, was Aunt Barbie!

On the rare occasions when the Sage left his studio Miss Barbara Issell went diligently to work in it—removing the dust of many weeks from books and plaster casts, waxing the furniture, destroying spiders and their webs, waging, in short, furious war against dirt and disorder. She wore, going into action, a kit that provoked smiles from the thoughtless. Round her massive head she twisted a silk bandana handkerchief. The ends of this were tied in an aggressive bow waggling above a shiny expanse of forehead. Not a wisp of hair could be seen. Having dully protected her head, Aunt Barbie would then slip on an immense blue overall covering every inch of her majestic person. Thus accoutred she would eye malevolently the brave persons who dared to intrude upon her labours.

The Colonel beheld this formidable woman, for the first time, through clouds of acrid, blinding dust; and a pungent smell of turpentine assailed his sensitive nostrils.

"I beg your pardon," he stammered.

"Not at all. What do you want, sir?"

The Colonel nearly replied: "A large whisky and soda." He said instead, stiffly:

"I am Colonel Somervell."

Then he sneezed violently.

"You had better come into the kitchen," said Aunt Barbie.

The Colonel followed her into that clean and admirably ordered room. He had sustained a shock, but good manners survived it. This good woman, who suggested to him Boadicea, must be Issell's housekeeper. She would lead him to Miranda. He said courteously:

"I came over from Chorley to see Mr. Issell, but I understand that Miss Issell is here."

"She is," replied Aunt Barbie dourly.

"Can I see her?"

"I am Miss Issell. Mr. Adam Issell's sister."

The Colonel had difficulty in disguising his feelings, and the dust of the studio seemed to have dimmed his vision. It had settled thickly upon his blue serge suit. He said hesitatingly:

"Your—your niece is not here?"

"No. Will you sit down, Colonel Somervell? I have a sitting-room of my own, but since we had to dispense with a servant I have not had time—to—a—*sit* in it."

"Quite—quite."

The Colonel might be well astonished—as he was—with Aunt Barbie's appearance, but he recognized in the firm tones of her voice the *maîtresse femme*. He sat down.

"You wish to talk to my niece?" The Colonel inclined his head, "I know, of course, of this entanglement."

The Colonel smiled. "Entanglement" pleased him. He guessed that Miss Issell had opinions of her own and became curious to hear them. More, he had prepared a few phrases and was anxious to air them.

"And what do you think of it?" he asked suavely.

Aunt Barbie had sat down opposite to her visitor. But we should do her injustice if we hinted that this was disagreeable to her. What she valiantly suppressed in the presence of "the children" bubbled to her lips in sparkling ebullition.

"Tomfoolery!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Playing ducks and drakes with life," she deigned to explain.

The Colonel smiled at her.

"That is my opinion, Miss Issell. But I should like, if you could spare the time," he added politely, "to look at this—a—entanglement from your point of view."

"Being an ugly old woman I can speak plainly."

"I assure you that I value plain speech."

"You seldom hear it."

The Colonel was taken aback, but, first and last, he prided himself upon being a sportsman.

"I have heard," he said pleasantly, "very plain speech in the hunting-field, madam. Pray go on!"

"I have not met your son. I have purposely kept out of his way. He is, I take it, like you."

"There is a resemblance," Colonel Somervell admitted.

"I am told that he will be a lord some day."

"Humanly speaking—yes."

"Naturally I can't blame him for that. You and he belong to a class that is called quite wrongly the upper class."

"Wrongly?"

"I repeat—wrongly. I share my brother's views upon this particular point."

"Um! He thinks that, does he?"

"My brother is a remarkable man. In him extremes meet. He has the brains of a genius and the heart of a child. He believes in truth and beauty. He is far ahead of his time. The class to which you belong, Colonel Somervell, hides from truth and has no clear vision of beauty. Can I offer you a glass of lemonade?"

"Please."

Aunt Barbie had perceived that her visitor was moistening dry lips with a parched tongue, and the ministering instinct asserted itself. When the Colonel had accepted and drank his lemonade, which was excellent, he metaphorically tightened his belt.

"You say that we hide from truth, madam?"

"I do. The nude distresses you. I quote my brother. For generations you have covered up the nude. Truth, to-day, is revealing herself to you half-dressed, and the more shocking on that account. To my brother and me two things count enormously—intelligence and honesty. We also believe in service, not servitude. I objected strongly to my niece becoming a parlourmaid, not because I am a snob, but because I am essentially practical, which my poor brother is not. The tendencies of domestic service are debasing. They oughtn't to be, but they are. I hated the idea of my niece associating with fellow-servants who, in my experience, are neither honest nor intelligent. But so far as I can see they have not contaminated her—yet. She has been educated by my brother; she is intelligent and honest. I hoped that she would marry a man as intelligent and honest as herself."

The Colonel became thirsty again. Aunt Barbie being an Issell and therefore richly endowed with powers of vocal expression was soaring beyond him. He felt un-

comfortable and penuriously at a loss for words. Nevertheless, he knew that he had been challenged.

"You imply, madam, that my son is not intelligent nor honest?"

"I have not met your son, but he belongs, unfortunately, to a class that sets rank and position above intelligence and honesty."

"Not above honesty."

"Pardon me! I am, I repeat, practical. We Issells read and observe. Have you read Thackeray?"

"I have, madam."

"Do you consider him a liar?"

"Certainly not."

"You admit his claim to serious consideration as a writer?"

"Of course I do."

Aunt Barbie said trenchantly:

"Every line that Thackeray has written exhibits your class as preferring rank and position to intelligence and honesty. There may be many exceptions. You have met my niece?"

"Yes."

"You liked her?"

"I did."

"Because you recognized her intelligence and sincerity. But as soon as you discovered that she was the daughter of a tradesman in Moscombe you objected to her as a daughter-in-law."

The Colonel moistened dry lips once more. The facts were uncontrovertible. It is impossible to conjecture what he might have said in rebuttal, because Aunt Barbie concluded triumphantly:

"And, from your point of view, you were right. Society, as it is constituted at present, justifies you. Therefore—we both deplore an entanglement that I stigmatise as—tomfoolery."

The most astounded and confounded man in Moscombe rose—he almost staggered—to his feet. Courtesy, however, so integral a part of his make-up, sustained him to the end of this remarkable interview.

"We will work, madam, not together, but apart, to disentangle the—a—entanglement."

With that he bowed and retreated.

IV

We can hardly censure the Colonel for keeping to himself what Aunt Barbie had said to him. When he met his son, he confined speech to the curt remark that Adam Issell was absent from home. To relieve, ever so slightly, an increasing irritability, he added:

"I saw the shop. It's unspeakably awful."

"Did you see the studio?"

"Through clouds of dust."

Even to the wife of his bosom he could say nothing more. He was conscious of being wounded, and the primitive animal, which lurks in all of us, constrained him to lick his wounds in solitude. To his credit he perceived Aunt Barbie's point of view. And, being a gentleman, he cherished no rancour against her. He thought: "They have brains, these Issells." Ultimately he decided that Aunt Barbie must be at heart a Bolshevist.

Next day, Friday, Ralph appeared at the breakfast table in hunting kit. Upon the sideboard flanking the silver dishes lay the letters. Colonel Somervell observed

a wise rule: he never opened his letters till after breakfast. And this rule had been imposed upon wife and children. Ralph, however, perceived a small parcel beside his letters, and recognised on it Miranda's delicate calligraphy. He supposed instantly that the darling had sent him another present. Hastily, he slipped the tiny package into his pocket and attacked vigorously a grilled sole. The prospect of a day's sport under ideal conditions whetted his appetite. The Colonel trifled with a rasher of bacon.

Ralph, perceiving this, said genially: "You don't seem to be getting your nose into your corn, Father."

"I had a wretched night," growled the veteran.

Whenever the head of the house growled at breakfast, the other members of the family were trained to leave him alone. Very soon the Colonel rose, seized his letters, and disappeared. Ralph, some ten minutes later, wandered towards the stables. Out of sight of the house, he opened the package.

It held nothing but the engagement ring!

CHAPTER XV

EPILOGUE

I

LOOKING back, afterwards, Adam Issell often marvelled that such astonishing changes could have taken place in three short months. In August he had been a petty tradesman in Moscombe. November found him and his in a comfortable flat in Hampstead, high above the fogs and dirt of London, high also above those cramping disabilities which had made life in Moscombe a mere struggle for existence. His new freedom of mind and body was not only due to the fact that he had won the first prize for his "Flame Chintz." That had meant a fair measure of fame and fortune, inasmuch as he was now the Art Director of a business likely to increase enormously in prosperity. But, underlying material success and dominating it was the glad conviction that recognition of his best work had come to him from without. No artist, however great, is at heart independent of others. Beyond this again was the stimulus of finding himself in the right environment, in touch with what Purdie called the right people, hailed by them as a master of his craft.

Bewildering excitements had followed close upon the heels of his visit to London. Purdie seemed to have

taken him into his strong grasp there and then. He was told what to do, and he had done it.

"You have drifted," said Purdie, "out of a back-water into the flowing tide. It will carry you far."

And so it had proved. In the evening of his life, so to speak, he put to sea with a wind astern filling his sails and the port of comfort in sight ahead.

To no man, however, does Fortune come with both hands full. At the moment when the "Flame Chintz" was awarded first prize, he was desperately unhappy about Miranda. The joy in life that rejuvenated the father seemed to have abandoned the daughter. The fact that she attempted to dissemble with him made the situation more poignant. She left Mrs. Merrytree's service thinner and paler. The removal from Moscombe to Hampstead seemed to exhaust her. To the Sage she explained her motives in returning her engagement ring.

"He was not what I thought him to be, Daddy."

"You have done the right thing, the only thing. I am proud of my daughter."

"But I could say nothing to him. That seemed cruel. Because he loved me."

"You were both victims of the preconceived idea. You saw him as strong; he saw you as weak and yielding. I blame myself bitterly for allowing you to drift together."

"I would have faced anything, anything, with him. But he was afraid of the half-seen."

Adam Issell kissed and comforted her.

"We cannot be strong," he told her, "without suffering."

Purdie offered her work under her father. She wondered what he thought, but he said nothing about Ralph Somervell.

Epilogue

II

When he received back his ring, that young gentleman flung it, metaphorically, in the teeth of his sire.

"She won't have me."

Certainly the Colonel was disconcerted. It is difficult to imagine what King Cophetua would have said and thought had the beggar-maid jilted him. Possibly, the Colonel dwelt the more persistently upon Miranda's attractiveness after she had flatly refused to marry his boy. Alone with his wife, he permitted his fancy a wider flight.

"He says we have wrecked his life, Bertha."

"We wreck our own lives," replied Mrs. Somervell wisely.

"What a will that young woman must have!"

"No doubt. The whole affair was a grievous mistake. We may hope and pray that dear Alice will console him later on."

But Ralph kept away from Apperton Old Manor, and accepted an invitation to shoot in Scotland. His long leave would be up in November. He refused to exchange into the home battalion because—so he said—he would be bored in England. Like Miranda, he lost colour and weight.

She had refused to meet him. When he pressed a reasonable claim for explanation, she wrote curtly:

"Our love was not strong enough. You are unhappy and so am I. It is better to be unhappy before marriage than after."

So Purdie had been right after all. That rankled horribly. Honest with himself—when it was too late

—he knew that he had temporized. She had been his for the taking, but he had not taken her.

In mid-September all the papers with which Purdie was connected announced that Adam Issell had won the £500 prize. For a brief season the Sage became something of a celebrity. There were many biographical notices. He was the guest of honour at a public dinner given by Purdie at the Savoy Hotel. The young man said bitterly to his sire: "You see what the world thinks of this petty tradesman."

About this time Lord Bisterne died. Colonel Somervell succeeded to the family honours and estates without any sense of satisfaction. Business details worried him horribly. He spent long days alone with his thoughts in London and at Bisterne. He stared at the family portraits. "Will Ralph give me a grandson?" became an obsession. He had plenty of time to make comparisons between the faces of the ladies who had married Somervells and the face of a petty tradesman's daughter.

"We do lack chins," he told his wife.

To add to his discomfiture, Ralph solemnly announced his intention of remaining single. We can take the statement not for what it was worth, but for the impression it made upon a distracted father. It blurred entirely his point of view; it changed conditions. The next of kin, after Ralph, was a ne'er-do-well, a scandalous spendthrift.

Finally, exactly what Purdie had predicted came to pass. Lord Bisterne reconsidered his judgments. Ralph, with a loving wife, might have done without him; he couldn't do without Ralph. He said to his Bertha:

"We have lost our boy. We must find him again."

"What do you mean, Arthur?"

"Second thoughts, my dear, are not invariably the best. I recognised great qualities in Miranda Issell. Of course in India a young man, at a loose end, may pick up anybody."

"And it's such a thirsty climate, Arthur."

They stared miserably at each other.

"Damn it all," exploded his lordship, "I shall have to give in."

"You will do what you think wise, my dear."

III

The new Lord Bisterne travelled to London and asked his son to dine with him at his club. Ralph was beginning to prepare for the journey to India. He would sail in November. Receiving his sire's invitation, he smiled grimly, quite certain that he would be entreated, after a capital dinner, to alter his plans. It was likely that his father would urge him to "chuck" soldiering altogether. Not till the port appeared did the talk between the two men become personal.

"Must you go to India?" said the father.

"Yes; I can't stick it in England. I want to oblige you, Father, but you must give me rope. There may be ructions in India. All the men who know seem certain of it."

"Your dear mother and I want you to marry and settle down."

"Marry——!" Ralph laughed derisively.

"Marry Miranda."

Ralph stared hard at his father. Now that the ice was broken, Lord Bisterne forged ahead easily.

"If I give my hearty consent, and it will be hearty, all will be well. Have you seen the Issells?"

"No; I've kept away from Purdie, too. Marry Miranda——? With your consent?" He brightened a little, not much. "I should have to begin all over again."

"Why not? Take it from me that young women are not fools where their own interests are concerned. Miranda, I admit, has shown pride. She refused to enter a family where she believed herself to be unwelcome. Come, now, I have surrendered; what do you say?"

"What Miranda will say matters."

"We will drink her health and yours."

They did so. Presently Ralph, touched by his father's affectionate manner, said hesitatingly:

"You are doing this for me? It's most awfully good of you."

"But I liked her, my boy, I liked her. It won't be difficult to love her."

"You are doing this thing, against your judgment, for me, because you want to keep me over here?"

"You can put it how you please, Ralph. Your mother and I do want you over here. Your duty, in my opinion, is at Bisterne. You ought to tackle all the land problems. I am too old for that. There is a full life awaiting you at Bisterne with plenty of sport thrown in."

Ralph detected a quaver in his father's voice. The cynical may attribute this to good wine, but Ralph was not cynical. And it struck him suddenly that his father looked greyer and older. What would he and his mother look like when he came back from India? They had been consistently kind and generous to him, although they had stood inexorably between him and Miranda.

"I have been thinking too much of myself," he admitted, "and all the time you have been thinking of me. I lost Miranda through thinking of myself. I see that at last. And whether I find her or not, I don't mean to lose you."

"I can't quite follow you, Ralph."

"I'll give up India, whatever Miranda says. I'll tackle this new job at Bisterne." But, as he spoke, he didn't look at his father, because he guessed that Lord Bisterne, at the moment, wanted him to look elsewhere.

IV

Upon the following afternoon Ralph called upon Adam Issell. He knew his address because a picture of the great designer at work in his new studio had appeared in at least three picture papers. Ralph found him at home. The northern window overlooked Hampstead Heath. The old books were in oak book-cases; the plaster casts stood sentries above them; above the casts hung the impressionist pictures. Armchairs and a vast couch were covered with a wonderful chintz. After the first greetings Ralph pointed a finger at them, saying:

"The Chintz——?"

"Yes."

"I don't wonder it took the prize."

"It glows, doesn't it?" murmured the Sage. He had welcomed the young fellow affectionately, being extremely sorry for him. And it was impossible to forget that the miraculous change in the Issell fortunes had been "engineered" in the first place by "the Captain."

Ralph congratulated him.

"This success of yours, Mr. Issell, is simply splendid.

It glows like your chintz. You look very well. How—how is Miranda?"

"I was very anxious about the child, but she is strong—strong."

"Is she here?"

"She will be back to tea. She is working at the factory in the art room. Really, you know, the child seems to have inherited executive ability from her aunt."

Ralph enquired after Aunt Barbie. That great woman, it appeared, was now reigning triumphantly over two servants.

"We are very comfortable," added Adam.

"May I wait till Miranda comes in?"

"Certainly."

"Will—will it upset her to see me, Mr. Issell?"

"N-no. I—I don't think so."

But he spoke with restraint. This seemed to Ralph natural. Burning to ask more intimate questions which bubbled up to his eager lips and stayed there, he was conscious of a change in his kindly host. Adam Issell had never lacked dignity, but success added authority.

Ralph congratulated him again upon all that had been achieved.

"Yes, yes,; I can devote myself to the work I love. I retain an interest in the shop at Moscombe. Amos is doing very well. He loves his work."

"Tell me how a man learns to love his work?"

Immediately the Sage took the problem between his teeth, and began to shake it vigorously. Ralph had spoken idly. Back of his mind was the desire to start the Sage talking till Miranda came in. Nevertheless he

inclined an attentive ear, because sincerity always challenges interest.

"We love the work we do well no matter what it is. I can remember how I loathed the drudgery of designing simply because hand refused to work with eye. A great virtuoso enjoys playing scales when he plays them perfectly. You enjoy golf because you excel at it. You are bored when you play badly?"

"I am."

"I am sorry for the men who have given undivided attention to games, because with advancing years their skill must decrease and their interest in exercising it."

Having assimilated this, Ralph said slowly:

"My father wants me to tackle estate management."

"Ah! I read that he had inherited a large property."

Ralph wondered whether the fact had impressed the Sage. He decided that it hadn't. Adam went on pensively:

"I can imagine nothing more absorbing than developing a landed estate. Woo Nature and she responds generously. Intensive culture, for instance. Wonderful!"

"I should have to chuck soldiering, Mr. Issell."

"Of course. I should imagine that you would be happier on the land. War is destructive. I prefer constructive work."

Ralph paused for an instant. Before seeing Miranda, he intended to apprise her father of Lord Bisterne's reversed verdict.

"I don't look forward, Mr. Issell, to doing any work alone."

Instantly the Sage became excited. His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"But you are wrong—wrong. That is the preconceived idea. That means—blinkers. Our best work *must* be accomplished alone. We have to think things out—alone, with a mind purged of clogging considerations, with a mind that can give undivided attention to the work in hand. We are here to work, to advance ever so slightly the progress of the world. Other things are incidental. They come; they go; work remains. An immense opportunity is yours. You may see it dimly to-day. I"—his voice faltered—"I have looked at my work through blinding tears, but I wiped them away and went on looking till my vision cleared."

Ralph blinked at him, but he understood. The Sage stood before him erect and vigorous, charged with a vitality that radiated from him. Not till this moment did Ralph realise how great a man he was. At the same moment, instinctively, he became sensible of some intention behind Issell's words. He could read in his blue eyes pity and sympathy. He felt that he was being warned as well as admonished. Then he heard the Sage's voice change in tone and inflection.

"Tell me, my boy, did you come here this afternoon merely to congratulate me upon my good fortune?"

"No; I wanted to do that, but there is another reason."

"Before you tell me that reason, I wish to say something to you. I am glad that you came. I hoped you would come. It is primarily through you that I am here. I shall never forget that, nor will Miranda. You interested a powerful friend in me."

"I was not altogether disinterested, Mr. Issell."

"No matter! We dare not analyse our motives too microscopically. Because I owe much to you I would

fain try to cancel some of the debt. What can I do for you?"

"My father," said Ralph, "consents to my marrying Miranda, if—if she will have me."

"Ah! I thought so. Your father loves you. He is willing to sacrifice his personal ambitions because of that. It is good news." But he spoke mournfully.

"I shall have to begin again with her," said Ralph humbly. "I know that."

The Sage turned his back on him, and walked to the window. Ralph felt the prick of an impending sword. He was tempted to sit down, but he remained standing. The Sage turned.

"You are too late," he said gently.

"Too late!" repeated Ralph mechanically.

"You loved my daughter. She loved you. But I cannot believe it was true love on either side. Why? True love never hesitates. You two approached each other in blinkers. Miranda beheld you as the fairy prince. You were the first to captivate her imagination. You beheld her, let us say, as Cinderella. So you rushed together. At the time I was apprehensive, because I feared that you were fair weather lovers. You were. I do not blame either of you. When you were whirled apart each suffered cruelly. Suffering comes to all of us sooner or later; we are made or marred by it."

"Miranda has found somebody else?" The Sage nodded. "Not—not Purdie?"

"Let us say rather that Purdie found her, as he found me, almost derelict. How strong he is we both know. Well, his strength prevailed. She loves him as he deserves to be loved."

"Purdie——!"

"Yes; your friend."

Ralph sat down and covered his face with his hands. The Sage left him alone for a minute. Ralph felt his shoulder grasped.

"Stand up, my boy. Look at me!"

The young man obeyed limply without volition of his own. He met the Sage's keen glance.

"The time has come when you must conquer yourself, Ralph. Nothing else matters. I believe that you are man enough to do it. You can slink away, if you choose; you can slide into unplumbable depths of misery, making those who love you as miserable as yourself. Or, you can remain here and meet two friends whose strength will fortify you. Which is it to be?"

"I can't meet them—yet."

"If you are to meet them at all now is the right time. It will never be so exactly right again. But it is a man's job. And if it is done as it should be done you can face other jobs with the conviction that they, ultimately, will be done too. I ask you, as a soldier, will you retreat or will you advance—gloriously?"

The Sage spoke with fire, with an intensity that was electric. And it may have pleased him that the young man did not respond instantly. He had acted too swiftly on impulse once before. Upon his ingenuous face, the Sage could read what was passing in a mind that was struggling to see without blinkers.

"Take your time," counselled Adam Issell. "Don't shrink from the half-seen."

Ralph smiled faintly.

"I shall not retreat," he said firmly.

 THE END.

BK0873899